Turnings

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FIJI FACTIONS

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For
Rani (1990–2007)
Beloved of us all
from all her grateful staff

Turnings

Why do you come to tease and touch
unknown places in my heart
singing with love's sharp knife.

Enticing me to abandon respect and reputation
to exchange strange caresses
savour an explorer's taste.

Your words tempt my years
dismantle the careful structures
the house built of staid scholarship.

Yet I am drawn to you
you open different doors
leaving me disoriented, unsure which way to go.

As is the life of the leaves so is that of men.
The wind scatters the leaves
to the ground: the vigorous forest puts forth others,
and they grow in
the spring-season. So one generation of men
comes and another ceases.

Norma Davis, *Bush Pageant*
quoted in Margaret Kiddle, *Men of Yesterday*

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1

The Road to Mr Tulsi's Store

Things past belong to memory alone
Things future are the property of hope.

For a child growing up in postwar Fiji, an ambition to become a scholar or writer of any kind was certain to invite ridicule, derision, sarcasm, pity, disbelief, enough to be told to have your head examined. Everything — culture, history, politics, a raw, uncertain life on the outer fringes of poverty — everything pointed to the utter futility of pursuing that pointless ambition. Colonial Fiji had no place for thinkers and writers and dreamers. The country needed useful, pliant cogs for the colonial bureaucratic wheel, not half-baked babus who might ask tricky questions and create mischief. We were also taught from an early age that the humanities were for no-hopers. Bright children did law, medicine, pharmacy, accountancy and the hard sciences. That was the path to wealth and status and powerful connections, professions which brought fame

and fortune to families, secured good marriages. And yet, despite that brutal perception, many of us managed to break out and do the unthinkable.

The ambition to be somebody other than a poor farmer's son, inheriting his father's world of debt and degradation in the large looming shadow of indenture came to us early. Like most Indo-Fijians of the time, we were struggling cane growers making a measly living on ten acre plots of leased land. The ten-acre plot was the handiwork of the CSR Company which dominated our life for nearly a century. The Company was the reason why we were in Fiji in the first place. With careful husbandry, the limited acreage could be big enough to make the farm economically viable, but certainly not big enough to make us too big for our boots. The CSR was no fool. We were encouraged to seek alternatives, to get some education and to look for a career. If we were lucky enough, we could end up as a junior bank clerk, a subaltern in the civil service, as a primary school teacher. Anything else was beyond our collective imaginative horizon.

We were lucky. The timing was right. By the late 1960s, Fiji was on its way to independence which came in 1970, the year I finished my high school. The new nation needed teachers, public servants, economists, accountants. Employment prospects looked promising. We were fortunate, too, that the University of the South Pacific opened in 1968, giving us an opportunity for higher education denied the earlier generations of whom only a few — perhaps ten or so a year, the cream of the crop — were sent overseas on government scholarships. The rest disappeared into the lower bowels of the burgeoning bureaucracy, to remain there obscure and hidden for the rest of their lives. The opening of the local university in Suva must constitute one of the turning points in modern Pacific Islands history.

The university was for me an enormously enlarging experience. We encountered new and strange people from other parts of the Pacific, at first an unnerving experience for a boy from a traditional Indo-Fijian family from an isolated rural community. We thought more about the world around us. We glimpsed the uncharted contours of our own local history. For the first time in our studies, we came across names of local people and places and events in printed text, which made everything real, authentic, and so enthralling. As I read more and matured, I realised that this is the life I wanted for myself, a life of reading and writing, causing consternation among some relatives and village people who somehow thought it strange for grown up men to spend all their time with their heads buried in books, engaged in 'waste time' activity. I was determined to become an academic, and an academic I have been all my life.

History was, and remains, my discipline. The emphasis at school and university was on acquiring information, not on learning how history was actually done. That basic knowledge, so necessary, was acquired late, privately, haphazardly. And gaps remain. History, we were taught, was contained in written documents. Facts spoke for themselves. A heavily footnoted text, closely argued, close to the facts, was the ideal we aspired for. Oral evidence could be used to spice the story, but it had to be chutney, not the main dish. It is not the kind of history I read or write now. I am comfortable with the notion that knowledge is tentative and partial, in both senses of the term. And I accept that those binary oppositions, which once seemed so sacrosanct, taken as given, are porous and problematic. I still profess my discipline, but I find writing about unwritten pasts creatively and imaginatively more intellectually challenging and emotionally rewarding.

It is not easy. Whatever their particular idiosyncrasies and predilections, historians have their basic rules of engagement. We may embroider, speculate, and generalize, but we should never invent. That is a cardinal sin. Our imagination is disciplined. We work with what has already existed. How we shape that into an argument, a thesis, a narrative, will depend on the values, assumptions and understandings we bring to bear on our work. The process of reasoning and argumentation must be transparent and referenced. But conventional historical approaches fail when dealing with unwritten pasts where memory is not properly archived and written documents do not exist.

The idea of writing history creatively came to me when I spent a year in India in the late 1970s gathering material for my doctoral dissertation on the background of Fiji's indentured migrants. For nearly six months, I lived in the rural, impoverished region in northeast India from which most of the indentured labourers, including my grandfather had come. I soon discovered that for me, India was not just another site for fieldwork, not just another country. It was the land of my forebears. We grew up in Fiji with its myths and legends, its popular sacred texts, with sweet, syrupy Hindi songs and films. Our thatched, bamboo-walled huts were plastered with pictures of film stars and various multi-coloured gods and goddesses. In short, India was an important cultural reference point for us. But I also discovered, while in India, how un-Indian I was in my values and outlook, how much I valued my own individuality and freedom, how Fijian I actually was. The Indian obsession with your 'good name' and status, the routine acceptance of ritually-sanctioned hierarchy, the addiction to horoscope, was beyond my comprehension. Out of that intense, emotionally wrenching experience came my first

effort at quasi-creative writing as I sought to understand the confluence of forces which had formed and deformed me.

Encouraged, I began re-visiting in my spare time my unwritten village past. I began keeping a record of my conversation with people in the village, notes on things that seemed strange and curious. To give a concrete example. As a child, I was always intrigued by the presence of certain plants and other items at the prayer mound on auspicious occasions. Why bamboos, banana stems, rice and coconut? The village priest answered my queries squarely. Bamboo bends; it never breaks. So it was hoped would the family line. A banana plant is strong, prolific, difficult to kill off. Rice symbolises fertility. And coconut milk-water is offered to the gods because it is pure, uncontaminated by human hands. Why do we fast on certain days and not others? Why do Hindus worship the Tulsi plant? Why do we apply ash to our foreheads after prayer? Why did the pandit blow the conch a certain number of times while doing puja? Questions like that. An archive of anecdotes and information was slowly building up.

'Mr Tulsi's Store: A Fijian Journey' is the result of that private investigation over many years. My main aim was not factual accuracy in the conventional sense of footnoted facts to support a conclusion. Rather, it was to discover the inner truths of a community's life, its fears, hopes and aspirations, its rituals and ceremonies that gave it purpose and cohesion, the way it celebrated life and mourned its passing, the way it educated its young and taught them about their place in the world. In such an exercise, the historian's traditional concern for truth and understanding must mingle in some way with the approach of an imaginative writer to create a work of art. Non-fiction and fiction fuse to produce what I call 'faction,'

that is, lived, factual experience rendered through a quasi-fictional approach. In this endeavour, the writer gives his solemn word to tell the truth as he sees it. He is on oath. The rules of engagement here are more flexible; there is space for imaginative reconstruction and rumination. But all within limits. The material is given to the writer, and preserving its essential truth (as opposed to its factual accuracy) is his primary concern. His 'characters' are not the inventions of the writer's imagination; they represent real people whom he has seen and observed or whose stories he has been told. The stories have their own inner logic and destination beyond the control of the writer; he is merely the vehicle for their expression. The narrative is not 'sexed up' for literary effect in the way it is in works of fiction. Its singular purpose is to tell the story as truthfully as possible, without hype or hyperbole.

The book is largely a conversation about the Indo-Fijian village life of my childhood. Tabia is an Indo-Fijian settlement like most others in the sugar cane belts of Fiji. It was where I was born, but now it is a labyrinth of evanescent memories. I would not have considered it in any serious way but for two things. The first was the effect of the coups in 1987 of which the Indo-Fijians were the main target. I had written generally about the coups as an involved, scholarly observer, but an opportunity to serve on a commission to recommend a new constitution for Fiji brought me close to the coalface of raw life they lived on the raw fringes, on the sufferance of others. The world which was once intimately familiar to me was vanishing. As the leases expired and Fijian landowners took their land back, people were leaving, uprooted and unwanted, to look for alternative employment. And modernity had touched life in numerous ways. There was greater contact

with the larger world through radio, newspapers and television. People had migrated. The self-contained, struggling, isolated village of my childhood was gone. I wanted to record its old ways before it was too late.

I wanted to do that partly for its own sake. But there was another motivation as well. Since the coups of 1987, more than 120,000 Fiji citizens, mostly Indo-Fijians have migrated, with about 40 percent of them coming to Australia. A new migrant, or shall I say transmigrant, community is forming. Children are growing up uncertain of their cultural identity, unsure of their way in the world. They are from Fiji but they are not Fijian; they look Indian but they are not Indian. My own children are no exception. Confused about who they are themselves, they are disbelieving of my own background. The world that formed me is alien to them. They find it hard to believe that I was born in a thatched hut on my father's farm, delivered by an illiterate Indo-Fijian midwife, that I grew up without electricity, running water or paved roads, that our generation's motto, a painful reminder of our unpredictable and uncertain condition was 'one step at a time.' They think their old man is hallucinating. 'Mr Tulsi's Store' is my attempt to connect today's disconnected and dispersed generation of Indo-Fijians with their historical and cultural roots.

And what a story there is to tell. Here was a community, struggling to escape the shadow of servitude, cut off from its cultural roots and cooped up in a hostile environment, making do with what it could, starting all over again, all on its own. And yet managing in time to build up a cohesive and coherent community. Within a generation, a people who had begun with nothing, had achieved so much. How did that happen? What was their inner world like? What kept the community

together? How did people cope with sorrow and grief? What brought joy to the community? How were disputes settled? How did people comprehend the forces of change which lapped the boundaries of the village? Things like that. A whole unwritten world waiting for exploration.

We were from the village, but immensely knowledgeable about the wider world, probably more than most children today. That was a legacy of our colonial education. In geography classes, children had lessons on Burma, Central China, Malaya, Singapore, Manchuria, East Anglia, the Midland Valley of Scotland, about Brittany, Denmark and the Mediterranean coastlands of France, about California, the Canadian maritime provinces, the corn belt of the United States, Florida and the St. Lawrence Valley, about the Snowy River Scheme, irrigation farming in Renmark, South Australia, the transport problems of the Cook Islands — they had transport problems there? — the relief maps and the sheep industry in New Zealand and Australia. I did not do well in geography because, among other things, I did not know the name of the highest mountain in Australia. It knew it began with a 'K', but wasn't sure whether it was Kosciusko or Kilimanjaro! Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie confused me. And try as I might, I just could not spell Murrumbidgee. What kind of name was that?

In history in the lower grades, we studied the rise of the Liberal Party in New Zealand, the importance of the refrigeration industry to New Zealand Agriculture, the Wakefield scheme, the Maori Wars, about John Macarthur, the merino sheep and squatters, the effects of the Victorian gold rushes and the rapidly expanding wool industry, topics like that. In higher grades, we left the antipodes to focus on the

grand themes of modern history. So we studied the unification of Germany and Italy, the Crimean crisis and the First World War, the Bolshevik Revolution, the rise of Adolph Hitler and Mussolini, the emergence of the trade union movement in the United Kingdom and, briefly, the rise of new nations in Asia. Pupils ahead of us by a few years had studied the causes of the 1929 Depression, the Partition of Africa, the social reform policies of Gladstone and Disraeli, the significance of the 'Import Duties Act of 1931,' the Gold Standard, the Abdication crisis, the Irish Free State. Important and highly relevant topics like that. I am not sure we understood all that we read. But that was not the point. The history books opened up a window to a past — even if that past was remote to all of us — that connected us to a wider world and to other human experiences in history. The process of learning, I suppose, was more important than the content. The hunger to know more about the world has remained with me.

In our English classes at secondary school, we studied both literature and language. I did not take much to grammar, could not get passionate about infinite and intransitive verbs or about predicates and prepositions. The knowledge was necessary, I suppose, but very dry. Literature, though, was something else, good, solid, untrendy stuff, that would be dismissed today as hugely Eurocentric and elitist: novels, short stories, poems and plays by John Steinbeck (*The Pearl*), William Golding (*Lord of the Flies*), Emily Bronte (*Wuthering Heights*), Joseph Conrad (*Lord Jim*), William Wordsworth (*Daffodils*), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (*Ancient Mariner*), Edgar Alan Poe (*Raven*), DH Lawrence (*The Snake*), William Shakespeare (*Hamlet* and *Merchant of Venice*), TS Eliot (*Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and *The Wasteland*). The list could go on endlessly.

Reading, broadening our imaginative horizon, was fun, but writing short composition pieces could be tricky. Try as we might, we found it hard to write a long meaningful paragraph on modern art, the astronauts, western films, the bottle drive or collecting for Corso, about the main stand at a flower show, the case for or against television in the home (we had no idea what this creature was), a climbing adventure, baby sitting or, of all things, a winter morning. In hot, humid Tabia! A few years ago, an old timer from Fiji living in Brisbane told me that in Senior Cambridge English exam, he was asked to write an essay on the 'Phenomenon of the Beatles.' Not paying heed to the spelling of the word and completely unaware of the existence of the musical group, he proceeded to write a long and meaningful essay on rhinoceros beetles which had recently ravaged Fiji's coconut industry! Coming from that kind of background, it was a miracle that we passed our external exams, and with good marks, too.

The metaphors of our own culture and allusions to our own past had no place in higher colonial learning, although in primary school we learnt Hindi and read about our ancestral culture and history, about various gods and goddesses and the heroes of Indian history. We had enough of the language to read the *Ramayana* and Hindi newspapers to our unlettered parents. The Hindi films, the Hindi music, the religious texts, the ceremonies and rituals we performed with mundane regularity, kept us intact as a community, connected us to our cultural roots, our inner selves. Thankfully, Hindi has remained with me as a hobby. I read and write it whenever I can.

But there was no Hindi in secondary school and beyond. I regret that now, but it did not seem to matter then. We were taught to learn and not question the value of colonial

education. Still, for all their cultural biases, the western texts opened up new worlds for us, levelled hierarchies based on economic wealth and social status, and connected us to other worlds and other pasts. They awakened our imagination, emphasized our common humanity across boundaries of culture and race, and sowed the seeds of future possibilities. The idea of the fundamental oneness of humanity has remained with me. For me still, knowledge comes from reading. Words I read in primary and secondary schools about the importance of books lodged deep into my consciousness. 'Books are the storehouses of all the knowledge in the world.' The printed word still retains its magic. Reading and all that it entails — discovery, exploration, adventure — is my life. For that, I am grateful to my 'colonial' heritage.

As I saw the world of my childhood fragment before my own eyes, I knew that I had to write down what I knew, both as a record as well as a reminder. Easier said than done. 'Mr Tulsi's Store' is the most difficult book I have ever written. And, therefore, more rewarding. I am not sure that after this book, I will be able to enjoy the kind of history I was used to. I don't regret the rupture, although there is, of course, a certain sadness in parting company with someone who has been with you a long time, been good to and for you. That feeling of loss, though, is compensated by the thrill and challenge of setting sail in unfamiliar winds. Time will tell, as it always does, whether I took the right turn at the right moment. But it has been a bountiful journey so far.

Turnings is not a sequel to *Mr Tulsi's Store*, but it attempts the same task of capturing the lived experiences of unwritten lives. It too is about margins and movements, a record and a reminder of a time, a place and a people. It is

intended for the reader interested in the stories of fragile lives half hidden from view, just beneath the surface, simmering, stories of ordinary folk — teachers, farmers, workers, children, rural shopkeepers, housewives — caught in the grip of turning times, forced to change, adapt and move on. The book is not for the smugly self-referential, endlessly self-indulgent and aggressively self-promoting literary critics who drain the humanities of their true significance through obscurantist prose without saying much at all. If *Turnings* fosters a deeper and more sympathetic awareness of the predicaments facing a people caught in circumstances beyond their control, my purpose in writing it will have been amply achieved.

Mr Tulsi's Store: A Fijian Journey was published by Pandanus Books (Canberra) in 2001. It was judged one of ten 'Notable Books' for the Asia-Pacific for 2002 by the committee of the San Francisco-based Kiriyama Prize and was 'Highly Commended' 2002 ACT 'Book of the Year'.

2

The Dux of Nasinu

> I am not a teacher: only a fellow traveller
> of whom you asked the way. I pointed
> ahead of myself as well as of you.

The death notice in the local daily read: 'Mr Kali Charan, 1935–1995. Teacher, Brother, Uncle to Many. Passed Away Peacefully. Sadly Missed By All. Cremation will take place at the Vatuwaqa Crematorium at 2 pm on Saturday.' The name rang a bell; the studio photograph in the notice confirmed it. A tall, fine-featured man, dark, bald, steady, penetrating eyes, in suit and tie. He was briefly the head master of Tabia Sanatan Dharam School in the mid-1960s but had reportedly left under a cloud.

About a hundred people turned up at the crematorium amidst warm drizzling Suva rain. Most were retired teachers, Mr Charan's ex-pupils and former education officers. Mr Shiu Prasad, Education Officer (Primary) in Labasa in the mid-1960s, spoke briefly. 'Kali did us proud,' he said. 'He was a stubborn man, but a man of courage and honour whose

'victims' are some of the leading citizens of our country. We are not likely to see the likes of Kali again soon.' His former students nodded silently in approval.

The priest in white dhoti and flowing kurta intoned some mantras from a book covered in red cloth before the flames claimed the body. Mr Prasad then walked towards me. 'Very good of you to come, doc,' he said. 'Did you know him?' he asked gently. 'Slightly,' I replied. 'I was in the early grades. Mr Charan taught the higher classes.' 'What a fine teacher, what a fine record,' Mr Prasad remarked. 'He could have gone places, but he chose to spend his whole career in the classroom.'

There was something about the old-timers like Mr Charan that demanded admiration and respect. Many like him in the early days would have come from poor farming backgrounds, the first ones in their families to complete primary school, carrying on their shoulders the hopes of everyone. Teachers were the pillars of the community, exemplars of moral behaviour and window to the outside world. After a couple of years of training at the Nasinu Teachers College, they would be posted to places far away from home, often among strangers, without the basic amenities in the living quarters, but never complaining, imbued with the spirit of public service. They saw teaching as both a profession as well as an honoured way of life. Mr Charan belonged to that pioneering generation.

I knew little about Mr Charan except that he had always remained a mysterious, forgotten figure in Tabia, his name erased from local memory. Mr Shiu Prasad was the person to ask. From Tabia, Mr Charan had been posted to Natabua Primary and subsequently to other major schools in the cane belt of Western Viti Levu, ending up, at the special

invitation of the Education Department, as the headmaster of the perennially plagued Dabuti Primary, a Fijian school in Suva. 'We sent him wherever they needed a good teacher and wherever standards had to be raised.' Mr Charan preferred it that way. I was interested in Mr Charan's Tabia sojourn.

Mr Kali Charan would have been in his mid-thirties when he was appointed to Tabia, initially over the quiet objection of the School Committee. They wanted some one from Labasa. The village 'owned' the School and they wanted a headmaster of their own choice, some one who understood their needs and concerns and would heed their advice. Normally, the Education Department would have obliged, but good head teachers were in short supply. Mr Kali Charan had a rising reputation as being among the best and with an unblemished record. The Committee accepted the decision reluctantly. They had no choice.

Nausori-born, Mr Charan was respected by his peers for his probity and progressive views, stubborn but fair-minded, not a man to mince words or evade argument, ready to take the 'path less trodden,' as he liked to say. Admirable qualities, but in retrospect they seemed ill-suited to a place like Tabia. At the outer edges of Labasa's sugar belt, Tabia was a rolling cane-growing settlement of loosely-connected villages, predominantly Indian and Sanatani (orthodox) Hindu, conservative and acutely self conscious, wary of the outside world. The School was the struggling community's proud symbol of achievement, its marker of progress. They wanted it to mirror the cultural values of the community as well.

Mr Charan set the example at the school. He would arrive punctually at seven thirty, inspect the teachers' teaching schedule for the day, prepare notes for staff meetings, and make

contingency plans for absentee teachers. At morning tea, he encouraged teachers to talk to him and among themselves, read the weeklies he had in his office. He would enquire about impending events in the community to acquaint himself with its affairs and to introduce himself. Teaching was his true vocation. There was no greater or better gift that teachers could give to the country than the instruction of the children, he would tell everyone. His philosophy of teaching was summed up in three words: 'Respect the Child.' Some teachers used to wielding the ruler or the belt demurred, but most welcomed Mr Charan's humane approach.

It was not with his colleagues at school but with the community that Mr Charan experienced friction when his liberal views clashed with their rustic conservatism. At an early general meeting, the village resolved that Hindu prayers should be made compulsory in every class before teaching began. All the usual arguments were advanced: imparting the right moral values to the children, preparing up-standing citizens, preserving tradition and culture. But there were objections. Arya Samajis, the reformist Hindus, wanted to know what kind of Hindu prayers would be said. And the Muslims were upset as well. 'We pay the building and school fees like everyone else. Why should our children be forced to recite Hindu prayers?' Some in protest threatened to withdraw their children from the school and send them to Vunimoli Muslim Primary some fifteen miles away.

The Sanatanis refused to budge. 'Muslims have Muslim prayers in their schools. Why shouldn't we have Hindu payers in ours?' they argued. 'And how many Samajis are there in the village? Two, three families? And they tell us what to do? Why should the tail wag the dog? That's the problem with us: slight

push and we bend over.' It was a tense meeting full of erupting anger and heated words.

Mr Charan suggested a compromise. They couldn't insist on a daily Hindu classroom prayer. 'Education Department will not allow it. Public money is involved. Yes, our Sanatan people started this school, but it now belongs to everybody. It *should* belong to everybody.' That went down poorly with many: their *own* teacher telling them this! 'We should have one weekly prayer at assembly time. It will not be compulsory. The Muslim children can pray at the mosque across the road before coming to school.' It was a sensible suggestion grudgingly accepted by the Sanatanis. 'Okay,' they said, 'but the prayers should be on Tuesdays,' the Sanatan day of prayer. Mr Charan had no problem with that.

Soon afterwards, another crisis engulfed the school. A Hindu boy, sharing lunch with his Muslim friend, had surreptitiously stolen a few pieces of curried meat from his friend's lunch box (*sispaan*) while his friend had gone to get water from the tap. When his friend told him apologetically it was beef (*bull gos*), the boy got violently ill and told his father. The Sanatanis erupted and went straight to Nanka Boss, the village *agua*, leader and chairman of the School Committee. 'This is their revenge,' some people said, meaning the Muslims. 'They will not rest until they have destroyed us. First they did it in India, and now they are trying to do it here.' 'I thought beef was banned from the school compound. If it wasn't it should have been. This school is like our mandir,' Nanka told Mr Charan. Meat was not banned, at least not through formal notice. 'We must straight away expel the boy who brought beef. Teach them a lesson. They must know who runs this school. Whose place this is.'

'Kaka, it was a mistake, an accident,' Mr Charan explained. 'There is no conspiracy. Children bring goat, chicken, pork, everything to school.' 'Yes, but beef is beef,' Nanka replied adamantly. 'In case you Suva people don't know.' Mr Charan himself was a vegetarian. 'Expelling the boy will achieve nothing,' Mr Charan pleaded. 'You will ruin his future and there will be more friction among our people.' This was Mr Charan's first encounter with religious controversy. It had to be stopped immediately before things went too far. 'This is not the time for division among ourselves, Kaka,' he told Nanka politely but firmly. 'Don't bring religion into this. The partition of India has nothing to do with this. We have far more important things to worry about.'

'Beef will not be allowed, Master, whatever happens,' Nanka said defiantly, with an air of finality characteristic of community leaders. 'Otherwise you will have blood on your hands. Please tread carefully. I am telling you.' Being even handed, Mr Charan suggested that both beef and pork should be banned from the school compound. He rejected the call by some to have all meat banned. Cutting our nose to spite our face was how he put it. Once again, the committee reluctantly accepted Mr Charan's advice. Nanka was frustrated, as were many others in the village. They 'owned' the school but could not control what went inside it.

Nanka's relationship with Mr Charan, never warm, slowly began its downward slide. He had opposed Mr Charan's appointment in the first place. Suva always sent out the second best, the rejects and the misfits to Labasa, he suspected. The best remained in Viti Levu. Besides, he had a Labasa-born candidate, distantly related, in mind. Mr Charan, new and independent, was a potential threat. Before he had arrived,

Nanka had been the village's eyes and ears, their main contact with the world outside. Visiting dignitaries and aspiring politicians visited him whenever they passed through the settlement. He wielded considerable influence as the chairman of the local advisory council. He was the unofficial interpreter of local public opinion. He was Mr Tabia.

Barely literate, Nanka was proud of his home grown wisdom. Tabia was his world; he was possessive about it; he cared for none other. It gave him a sense of place and identity and purpose. He had seen it evolve from a small collection of rudimentary thatched huts scattered haphazardly over rough land, damaged by poverty and despair, a place where no father in his right mind would marry his daughter, into a slowly flourishing place beginning to be noticed and commanding respect. And he wanted that enclosed, culturally self-sufficient world shielded from undesirable outside influences. And that included teachers from Viti Levu.

Mr Charan was a complete contrast. He was, in his way, an intellectual, moved by a passion for ideas rather than by attachment to place. A private man, he read widely. He was aware of political changes taking place in the country. The talk of independence was intensifying. The colonialists were dragging their feet, raising objections, playing the race card, but he knew in his heart that Fiji would become independent in his lifetime. Mr Charan did not hide his political views. He subscribed to *Pacific Review* and *Jagriti*, the two main anti-colonial papers aligned to the Federation Party. He saw politics as an essential part of education. 'Today's children will be tomorrow's leaders,' he used to tell the teachers. 'Child Our Hope.'

Informal debates — *bahas* — were common in Tabia in the 1960s, at the local shop, during wedding celebrations and

other social gatherings. Many Muslims, some Arya Samajis and a handful of Sanatanis supported the Alliance, some from fear of Sanatani domination and others from genuine conviction and commitment to the party's proclaimed multiracial platform. But this was solid cane country and proud Federation heartland, solid in support of immediate independence. The Alliance supporters were often derided as opportunists and turncoats and sometimes even excluded from social gatherings. Politics was peoples' passion in Tabia. Mr Charan said little about the Indian and Fijian supporters of the party, reserving his wrath for the *machars*, mosquitoes, the European colonial masters, blood-suckers who had kept the country divided for so long. The Federation Party's motto, 'One Country, One Nation, One People,' was his as well.

Nanka never directly confronted Mr Charan in the debates. 'I am with the people,' he would say when asked for his views, 'but some of us should be on the other side as well. That is good for us. Then, I will know all their secrets, *poll*.' To clinch the argument, he would cite passages from the Ramayan. 'Lanka was destroyed only because Vibhishan [Ravana's brother] revealed the secrets from the inside. *Ghar ke bhedi lanka dhaawe*. 'Blood will always be thicker than water.'

To the district administration officials, he presented himself as a true and trusted friend, spreading the good word on their behalf, slowly gaining ground in their favour – as long as they kept him as chairman of the advisory council. He was a master at playing the two sides against each other. Piped water here, a culvert there, and a bridge somewhere else meant a lot to Nanka and to his standing in the community. Mr Charan had the full measure of the man, knew all his plans in advance, his contacts. Mr Shiu Prasad's deputy was his eyes and ears in

the civil service. And they thought only Europeans could play this game, Mr Charan chuckled to himself. Trumped constantly in front of people who looked up to him, Nanka grew ever more irritated with Mr Charan.

When the general elections were announced, Mr Charan went into a different gear. He was a Federation man, but more than promoting the interests of his political party, he wanted people in the village to get engaged with the wider debate about the future of the country. He invited the candidates, both Fijian and Indian, and local party leaders to speak at the school. He once even organised a debate on 'Should Fiji Become Independent?' at the school and got the teachers to take sides. School children carried notices of meetings and rallies to their parents.

Nanka objected. 'Master, the school should not get involved in politics,' he told him. 'I am hearing things from people. Not good things. People want education, not politics. Stick to teaching.' 'It is not politics, Kaka, it's the future of the country, the future of our children. If we don't talk about it, who will? The freedom to have the right to live as we wish: what could be more important than that?' School facilities were open to all parties and independent candidates. But that was precisely the problem for Nanka. Federation rallies were packed, complete with food and music and rousing, long-remembered speeches full of fire and pretended fury, but only a paltry few turned up to Alliance meetings and then, too, somewhat apologetically. The villagers welcomed the opportunity to listen to the leaders, and there was little Nanka could do about it. Mr Charan was becoming a bit of hero for bringing distant debates and national political leaders to them. Tabia had not experienced anything like this before.

But just when Mr Charan's star was on the rise, the world collapsed on his head. An insidious rumour spread that Mr Charan was having an affair with the head girl, Jaswanti. Embroidered with lurid details and salacious gossip, it became the talk of the village.'A head master doing this: *kaisan zamaana aye gaye hai: Pura Kalyug*, people said. What has the world come to! Having caught the village's attention, Nanka quietly stoked the fire. People believed him. He was their leader. The matter was reported to the District Education Office. Mr Shiu Prasad was asked to investigate.

'So, what did you find, Master?' I asked. 'It was the Committee's word against Kali's. Kali denied everything. I believed him. I know the man. But by then matters had gone beyond control. Some rascals were threatening to burn down his quarters and beat him up, even kill him. That was Tabia in those days. Wild place full of fanatical men willing do anything to defend the honour of their women. *Izzat* was big with those fellows,' honour. 'Probably still is.' A report was sent to the head office. 'They knew my position, but they were worried about the escalating tension, about Kali's safety. No doubt there were some of the old crusty types who disapproved of Kali's politics and were eager to get him removed. Frankly, I was glad to have Kali out of there myself.'

Tabia was never what it appeared to be. Calm, friendly and laid back to outsiders, its residents knew it as a place full of intrigue and machination and double-dealing. Feuds and intra-village rivalries had long racked the community. People were always seeking advantage for themselves at every opportunity. Arguments and disputes abounded about everything. 'We can have an argument with an empty house,' one of them had said, although when need arose and circumstances demanded,

people put their personal differences aside for the greater collective good. The world saw that side of Tabia.

At Tali's shop one day, drinking kava with the usual gang — Mohan, Badri, Bhima and Piyare, I said, 'Mr Kali Charan died about a month ago, did you know?' I asked. 'Yes, we heard the news on the radio,' the group chorused. 'He taught me in class eight,' Piyare said, 'the best teacher I ever had. Arithmetic: he could add and subtract in his head, just like that. *Jaise machine*,' like a machine. 'And he was single,' Bhima added. 'His house was always open to senior students. We actually camped in his house when we were preparing for the Entrance exam.' 'Cent per cent pass that year,' Badri remembered. 'The proudest moment of my life.'

'He wasn't here long?' I asked. 'About two years,' Mohan replied. 'That's short.' 'Yes. He was forced to resign.' I remembered Mr Shiu Prasad's account. 'So what happened?' I asked pretending ignorance. Everyone looked at Piyare. 'Well, we all knew that Mr Charan was single and he seemed to be fond of Jaswanti.' 'Who wouldn't have been,' Bhima interjected. 'Yes, she was tall, very fair, very beautiful and very smart. *Poora Rani*,' like a queen. 'We couldn't touch her. We thought she would marry a lawyer or a doctor.' Piyare continued, 'She was snooty, ate her lunch by herself, didn't talk to anyone at recess. Sometimes, she would go to Mr Charan's quarters at lunch time.'

Word spread and gossip began. Whether Mr Charan or Jaswanti were aware, no one knew, but they were the talk of the senior class and, in time, of the village wags. 'One day, Jaswanti left class early mid-morning to go to Mr Charan's quarters,' Piyare remembered. 'Girl problem. We all saw a red patch on the back of her dress as she was leaving school that

day. That was when it all exploded.' 'But Mr Charan was teaching,' I said. 'Yes, but he went home for lunch,' Badri replied. 'Anything could have happened. We didn't know about women's problem in those days.'

'Santu was the culprit,' Piyare said. Santu was Bhagwandin's son who had since left the village to go to Savu Savu with his entire family. Santu had a crush on Jaswanti. He told all his friends that he would marry her one day, come what may. Jaswanti was indifferent. She was cold towards him, never returning his gaze or smiles, always ignoring him at recess and in the classroom. Rumour about Mr Charan devastated Santu. 'What happened, *yaar*,' his friends teased him. 'Not good enough, eh.' 'Or not old, enough,' Piyare recalled the cruel teasing. *U to maange murga, tum to chota unda*. She wants a real man, and you are just a kid. All this got Santu.

'I will show them who a real man is,' Santu resolved. He confided his plan to his closest friend, Kamla. They would swear that they had both looked through the window of the quarters and seen Mr Charan and Jaswanti kissing and cuddling. No one would dare contradict them. How could they? *Aankho dekha haal*. Eye witness account. Everyone had seen the red blotch on Jaswanti's pink dress. And they all knew that Jaswanti went to the quarters for lunch by herself. Rehearsing the details to perfection, Santu and Kamla approached Nanka. They told him their concocted story. Nanka nodded. 'Don't mention this to anyone, or you might get into trouble. Police trouble. I will take care of it myself.' 'We had no idea of what was happening until it was all over,' Mohan recalled.

A hastily convened meeting of the School Committee sat at Nanka's house one evening, Sadhu, Harpal and Kasi.

'Very bad news, *bhai, samaj ke barbaadi*' they all agreed, bad for the community. 'What to do?' 'We must get rid of the master before he does more damage,' Nanka advised. 'But we must be very careful,' Kasi added. 'One wrong step, and we could lose government funds.' '*E to sub khaali sunaa huwa baat hai, bhai*, all this is hearsay,' Harpal said. He was the most independent-minded of them. 'We have to get to the bottom of this.' 'We will, we will,' Nanka promised.

The next day after school, Nanka got hold of Mr Ram Prasad, the senior teacher, as he was walking home to Laqere. 'What's the story, master?' he asked. And, then, winking at him, he said, 'It will be good to have someone from Labasa, one of our own, to head the school. Why should they always dump Suva people on us?' Ram had been bypassed the last time in favour of Mr Charan. 'Yes, Boss, we are all disturbed by what we hear. What can we do? *Hum log ka kar sakit hai?* The morale is down among us. One thing is sure, we have lost respect and confidence in the headmaster.' 'Good, good, you must tell this to the Committee.' Nanka encouraged him. 'They must hear this from the horse's mouth. You tell them, master, tell them good and proper.'

The School Committee met the following week. The first to be interviewed were select members of the senior class, among them Piayre and Badri. 'What did you hear and see,' Nanka asked from behind a huge desk, his large hairy hands clasped together. 'Nothing,' Piayre replied. 'Nothing? What? Who told you to lie? *Moor kaun bharis haye*, who has filled your head [with lies]. Did she go to the master's quarters or not?' 'Yes, sir.' 'How many times?' 'Two or three times a week.' Badri concurred. 'Did you see anything in class, boy?' Sadhu asked without Nanka's belligerence. 'No sir.' 'Did he favour the girl

over you boys?' 'No Sir.' 'Then why does she come first all the time? 'Don't know sir.'

Santu and Kamla repeated their story to the Committee. 'Can you place your right hand on the Ramayan and swear that what you are telling is the truth?' Harpal asked. 'Yes, sir.' '*Court ke maamla hoye sake haye*,' Kasi reminded him, this could lead to a court case. The boys looked at Nanka, who nodded gently. 'Yes, sir.' 'Those two boys are from good families. *Accha gharana ke ladkan haye*. They will never lie to us. I know them,' Nanka reassured the other members. Master Ram Prasad told the Committee what he had told Nanka. 'The other teachers are very upset. All our reputations will be ruined,' he added. 'No good teacher would want to come here.' The Committee took Mr Ram Prasad at his word. None of the other teachers were interviewed. Nor was Jaswanti. 'The poor girl has had enough as it is,' Nanka told the Committee. 'We must spare her further pain.'

Then it was Mr Charan's turn. 'Master, what do you have to say?' Harpal asked. 'It's all lies,' he replied calmly. 'So everyone else is telling lies and you are the only one telling the truth?' Nanka asked, looking straight at him. 'Yes.' 'Why is it that the girl gets the highest marks and always comes first in class?' Kasi asked. 'Because she is the brightest of them all,' Mr Charan replied directly. 'She is the brightest student I have ever taught.' 'Is it true that she often goes to your quarters at lunch hour?' Kasi asked. 'Yes.' 'Why can't she study in the classroom, like the other children? And why is she the only girl who goes to your quarters?'

Mr Charan answered the question calmly. 'Kaka, this school prides itself on its good pass rate in the Entrance exam. It is among the best in Vanua Levu. You want good results.

You want the grant-in-aid increased. You want the classrooms upgraded, piped water improved.' The committee nodded uncertainly, not knowing what Mr Charan had in mind. 'All that depends on how well we do in the exams. Every mid-year, we do a selection test. Only those who pass are allowed to sit the Entrance exam. That way, we improve our pass rate. This year, Jaswanti was the only girl who passed, with six other boys. She needs all the quiet study time she can get. I have a spare desk at the quarters. She goes there during lunch time to study and complete her assignments. This is nothing new. I have done this for years, wherever I have taught.'

'What about the boys, or don't they matter?' Nanka asked. 'Yes. All the boys have been camping in the school for the last two months. I myself open the classroom at night and supervise them. They cook at my place. Good pass does not come easy, Kaka. *Khelwaar nahin haye*. We have to work doubly hard to make sure we do well. Jaswanti can't camp, she can't come to school in the weekends. That is why I have made a private arrangement for her to study at my quarters.' 'You know what people are saying, Master?' Harpal asked. He had been listening to Mr Charan's words intently. 'I don't know, Kaka. And I don't care. If I listened to all the rumours, I won't get anything done. These children and their success are my first priority, as they are yours. Or should be.'

'Don't mind, Master,' Sadhu asked apologetically, 'but why a man of your age and income never married? 'I will tell you,' Mr Charan replied, pulling out his wallet and fetching a passport size photograph of his dead wife. 'This is Shanti. We were married many years ago, over fifteen. She and our little boy died in a car accident near Navua. See this?' Mr Charan said, pointing to a healed gash on the right side of his head.

'Since then, marriage and family have never entered my mind. I could have married if I wanted to, but no. I have other things to do.' 'I am very sorry to hear that, Master, very sorry,' Harpal and Kasi said. '*Kaka, Ishwar ki mahima haye*, it's God will.'

'Very smooth, like oil on water' Nanka remarked after the interview. 'I believe him,' Harpal replied. 'I think the man is telling the truth. Poor fellow.' 'We must not rush to judgement,' Kasi advised. 'Yes, yes,' Nanka interjected. Sadhu as usual had not said much during the entire proceeding. 'If we let Master go, who will replace him?' he asked. *Kaun aur haye*: who else is there? 'Master Ram Prasad is qualified,' Nanka replied instantly. 'I have spoken with him. He is ready to take over.'

Baat bahut duur tak phail gaye haye, Nanka said as they sat mulling, word has spread widely. *Ab hum log ke izzat ke sawaal haye*. It's the question of honour now. 'Master can always find another school somewhere, but this will be the end of everything for us.' And then he reminded the others of all the hard work and sacrifice the people of the village had made to get the school started. *E samaj ke amaanat haye*. It should not be allowed to come to nothing. People have chosen us to uphold the *izzat* not only of the school but of the entire community. Let us not forget that. We are the custodians of their trust.'

A week later, the School Committee went to the District Education Office and told Mr Shiu Prasad about Mr Charan. 'We haven't taken this decision lightly,' Mr Nanka assured him earnestly. 'It is our unanimous decision. The whole community is behind us.' Mr Prasad went to the school and talked to the teachers. Apart from Ram Prasad, others were not forthcoming. They all seemed distressed by the whole affair though no one

spoke in Mr Charan's support either. It was too risky to go against the tide in a place like Tabia.

Mr Charan himself denied an impropriety. 'What a silly thing to do, Kali,' Mr Shiu Prasad told the headmaster, like the old friend that he had long been, 'letting a girl come alone to your private quarters at odd hours. This is not Suva, *yaar*, this is Tabia, just out of the jungle. I thought you had more sense than this, the Dux of Nasinu. No, as always, blind to everything but to your principles. Pig-headed. Your own worst enemy.'

Mr Charan was unrepentant and unapologetic but appreciated Mr Shiu Prasad's candour. 'I have done nothing wrong. We have got to break these ancient attitudes. I mean, here's the brightest student I have had in years. Given the opportunity, she will go places. Probably the first doctor or lawyer from this village. And all I did was to give her a little helping hand. Why won't they believe me? May be I should have asked her parents or something, but I never thought of that. I never thought this was a big deal. '

'These people are just beginning to walk, *yaar*, and you want to make them run?' Mr Shiu Prasad reminded him. 'Education is for boys, Kali. Girls are sent to school to learn the alphabets to become good wives and mothers. Remember Nasinu? The first priority for girls was to find a good husband.' 'Yes, and all that talent lost to mindless domestic, *gharana-grahsthi*, duties.' 'This is not the place for your kind of values and ideals, Kali,' Mr Shiu Prasad said. 'This is a grant-in-aid school, and there is little we can do. The Committee's views will have to prevail.'

'So what happens now? I leave, and this place goes on about its rotten ways?' Mr Charan asked. 'Pretty much,' Mr Shiu Prasad replied. 'Ram Prasad will be appointed acting

headmaster next week. There's an opening for a senior master at Natabua Primary. It's yours for the asking.' 'I have no choice, have I?' Mr Shiu Prasad shook his head. 'Kali, this place does not deserve you. You have far great things ahead of you.' He could fight the case, take the School Committee to court. 'What will that achieve? More bad publicity for you and the school. You will win, but will Tabia, or Labasa for that matter, really accept you back? *Kaun faaida*, What's the use.'

'There are hundreds of Tabias around the country, villages steeped in wilful ignorance,' Mr Shiu Prasad continued. 'Our country needs us now. We have a big role to play, to get things right for the future. For our children. This is a small set back for you, Kali, but we all know the truth.' 'Except the Education Department,' Mr Charan replied. 'Well, that's the circus on top of things happening in this country. If I am to be honest with you Kali, this is a blessing in disguise for us, for the Indian community. You will achieve much more in Viti Levu than you will ever here.' He reminded Kali of President's Kennedy's stirring words at his inauguration. Then Mr Shiu Prasad recited a couple of lines of a Talat Mehmood song they used to sing at Nasinu: it was their motto:

E zindagi ke raahi, himmat na haar jaana
Beete gi raat gham ki, badle ga e zamaana.

Oh traveller through life, do not lose hope
This night of anguish will pass, the world will change.

Mr Charan was depressed and frustrated, but unbowed. He had done nothing wrong. There was nothing to hide. A couple of weeks later, he left for Lautoka.

A sad end to a promising career of such a dedicated man in Tabia I found distressing. It was Tabia's unlamented loss. 'Why didn't people speak up?' I asked our yaqona group. 'This place runs on rumour and gossip, Bhai,' Mohan said. 'Once the word spreads, it catches on like wild fire. *Koi ke muh men lagaam nahi sako lagao*,'can't clamp everyone's mouth. 'People are very protective about their girls. One whiff of scandal, and the family's reputation is ruined forever.' 'Teachers are like parents in our community,' Bhima said, *Baap-Mai*. 'We look up to them.'

Which is why rumours about Mr Charan and Jaswanti were godsend for Nanka. In no time, rumour was transformed into unassailable fact. 'This is not the only evil thing the headmaster has done,' he told people. 'It is better that you don't know the full story. Otherwise who knows what might happen.' Quietly, he let it be known that some female teachers had complained to him about the way Mr Charan looked at them, called them into his office at odd hours, stood close to them. Master Ram Prasad had complained of being a marked man, his well deserved promotion blocked. And so it went.

People believed Nanka. After all, he was their *agua*, village leader. He had been their eyes and ears all these years. Many attributed the village's undoubted progress to Nanka's tenacity and connection to the local officialdom. People appreciated his generosity, his willingness to donate money and goods for local causes. As a mark of respect, people never called him by his first name (no one knew his surname) but always addressed him as 'Nanka Boss.'

But Nanka, being Nanka, had his own plans. He had his eyes on Jaswanti as the wife for his son, a car mechanic in

town. Jaswanti was the only child of Mangal, a big rice farmer in Laqere across the river. As soon as the rumours spread, Nanka approached Mangal and asked him to withdraw Jaswanti from school. *Keechad uchhade ke koi ke mauka nahi deo.* Don't give anyone a chance to throw mud at you. 'Jaswanti is like my own daughter.' Then he proposed marriage for his son to Jaswanti. Jaswanti left school before the final exams, and was married a few months later. All the six boys passed their Entrance Exams and went to Labasa Secondary and Sangam High for further education. One or two made it to university.

'Did Mr Charan ever talk about his Tabia days?' I asked Mr Shiu Prasad as we sat talking a few days after the cremation. 'Oh no, not Kali,' Mr Prasad replied. 'He was stubborn as a mule. Nothing could break his spirit. And nothing did. That is why he went on to become one of the most admired primary school teachers of this country.' 'And Jaswanti?' 'Yes, just before he left Tabia he said to me, 'Shivo, How many Jaswantis will we have to sacrifice before we come to our senses, before this place changes, before we break the shackles of the past? He was very idealistic in that way.'

'No feelings for Jaswanti?' I asked. 'Kali was Kali. He never re-married. I think losing his young wife and child haunted him. He blamed himself for their deaths.' 'Did you speak to Jaswanti?' 'Yes, I did.' 'And?' 'There was something there, but it is hard to say. I mean, this young bright girl in that god forsaken place, meeting a man who made her feel important, saw potential in her and encouraged her, tried to nurture her talents: it is only natural that she would appreciate the attention, don't you think?' I nodded in agreement. 'Yes, it is easy to fall under the spell of such a man.'

I wanted to meet Jaswanti. There was something about her that aroused my curiosity. I asked our yaqona group about

her whereabouts. 'They left the village several years ago,' Bhima and Piyare told me. No one knew where. It was rumoured that Jaswanti had left her husband after leaving the village, but no one could be certain. After Nanka's death, the family squabbled about property and there was a court case. *Sab chittar bitthar gayin*, Badri said, they all scattered. That was the way things were with many Indo-Fijian settlements, wrecked by disputes about land boundaries, damage to crop caused by straying cattle, heated words about social trespass, the encroaching tentacles of village moneylenders. The comforting cohesiveness of old was disappearing.

Jaswanti was gone, but not forgotten. 'She started the first *Mahila Mandal* here,' Piyare recalled, village women's association. 'And the *Tabia Patrika*,' Bhima added, the monthly newsletter. The women held cooking and sewing lessons, talked about improving hygiene in homes and paying attention to the education of girls. She had even managed to get herself a place on the School Committee, the first and for years the only woman to do so. It was largely for the education of her own daughters that Jaswanti had left the village where old views and values about the role of women still held sway and unlikely to change anytime soon. 'I hear that one of Jaswanti's daughters is studying medicine in Suva,' Bhima said. That news would have made Mr Kali Charan very proud.

3

Marriage

Bhola and his wife Sukhraji were resting on the verandah of their lean-to house one hot afternoon when Nanka, their neighbour, dropped by. '*Ram Ram bhai*,' he said to Bhola, greetings, as he parked himself on a wooden crate. Sukhraji dashed to the kitchen to make tea as Bhola and Nanka engaged in small talk about village affairs. When Sukhraji returned with three enamel cups of red tea, Nanka turned towards her and asked, 'Can I say something *Bhauji*?' 'Yes, *Babu*.' Sukhraji never called village men by their name, always called them *Babu* or *Badkau*, husband's younger and older brother respectively. That was the village way. 'Dewa is ready for marriage,' Nanka said, adding mischievously, 'And you are not getting any younger either. Bhola *bhai*, you listen as well.' Bhola listened, but didn't say anything. 'You need someone besides Bhola *bhai* to look after you.' Nanka was what people in the village called a *muh-chutta*, a loudmouth, a harmless joker, an impotent flirt, not to be taken seriously.

'What are you people for,' Sukhraji replied instantaneously. 'He is your son too.' This was village talk. 'Why don't you

people do something about it instead of putting all the responsibility on just the two of us.' 'Was waiting for the word, Bhauji' Nanka replied. 'All go now. But remember one thing, I will be the first to embrace the Samadhin,' the bride's mother. *Samdhin se chaati sab se pahile hum milaib.*'You can do whatever you want with her,' Sukhraji replied smiling. 'Just find us a good homely girl for our boy.'

Dewa's future had been on Bhola's mind for some time too, but he had not said anything to anyone. He himself had been married at seventeen, and Dewa was now nearly twenty. 'You don't want to be a grandfather to your own children,' Bhola remembered old timers saying. An unmarried man at that age caused comment, and Bhola had several younger children to think of. Besides, who knew when the passion of youth might lead him astray. Bhola thought of Asharfi's son Jhikka, who had made Dhanessar's daughter pregnant. The poor girl was sent away to another village, presumably to lose the child, but her brothers took their revenge. One night, as Jhikka was returning from a Ramayan recital, they ambushed him, beat him unconscious and threw him into the roadside ditch. No one said a word. No one volunteered information about the culprits to the police or the *panchayat*, the village council, and no one was ever apprehended. That was village justice. Rough and brutal and effective. Jhikka survived, but only as a chastened nervous wreck. Dewa was a good boy and Bhola wanted things to remain that way.

That night after dinner, Bhola and Sukhraji talked about Dewa. 'What Nanka Babu said is true,' Sukhraji said. 'I am getting on. We need another helping hand in the house.''Don't believe that flatterer,' Bhola replied, edging closer to his wife. 'He says that to everyone to make himself

feel younger. You have at least another two sons in you.' '*Chup*. Hush. What if the children hear such talk.' The 'children,' teenagers, were sleeping in the adjacent room in the huge thatched house. 'I want a break from all this routine. I want to visit relatives I haven't seen for years. Before it is too late. And grandchildren would be nice too.' Everyone else their age in the village was already a grandparent.

Grandchildren! How fast time had flown Bhola thought. It did not seem that long ago that he himself had got married. They had suffered so much together: the death of two infant children, the disintegration of the joint household, the betrayal of family and friends, the poverty. But through all that the family had remained intact. His family was all that he had. He was immensely proud of that, and of his wife who had been by his side faithfully all these years. 'Remember when we got married and you came here as a *dulhain*, young bride for the first time?' Bhola asked Sukhraji. 'Do I remember? I remember everything as if it happened yesterday...' Sukhraji's parents lived across the Laqere river at the edge of the cane settlement by the sea. They had moved there a few years after the '*Badi Beemari*,' the influenza epidemic of 1918. No one knew much about them, because they were not cane growers. Her father, Chiriya, was a *girmitiya*. He had been a train driver for the CSR on the Tua Tua line, but that was all that was known about him. How he became a train driver, when he came to Fiji, from which part of India, were all lost. Like so much of the history of his people. (Her mother died when Sukhraji was still an infant). After her father's death sometime in the 1930s, she was raised by various distant relatives. They were good to her, but she knew her place in the family. She cooked, cleaned and worked on the farm to make herself useful and kept out of peoples' way.

If Bhola was worried about Dewa, parents of girls faced a much bigger problem. No fate was worse for a family than to have a girl who dishonoured its name. *Izzat* or honour is big among village people. Girls were married off soon after puberty. It was so in Sukhraji's case. One day, her aunt said '*Ladki badi hoi gai hai.*' The girl is ready for marriage. 'Ready' meant the beginning of menstruation. Ganga, the village leader, was approached. Feelers went out and Bhola was identified as a good prospect. The family had a good name: no thieves or scoundrels or jail birds in the family closet, and caste status was compatible: one was a Kurmi, the other Ahir, both 'clean' cultivators. Family elders met and the marriage pact was sealed with an exchange of gifts. Sukhraji was betrothed at thirteen, and married two years later. Sukhraji came into a family of complete strangers, married to a man, a boy really, she had never seen before. She carried on her innocent shoulders the hopes of her entire family, knowing in her innocent heart that she could never return to them no matter what her fate in the new home. No one would have her back. The gift of a girl-child, *kanya daan*, once given can never be returned. The break was final.

At first things didn't go well for Sukhraji. She was dark though with fine features, whereas Bhola was fair, like his mother. They called her *karikki*, the dark one, derisively. Her mother-in- law, whom she called 'Budhia,' 'old woman,' was a real terror, a real *kantaain*, Sukhraji remembered. What went through Budhia's mind no one knew. Perhaps in old age, herself uprooted and displaced, she was trying to recreate the remembered world of village India where mothers-in-law reigned supreme. 'Have you forgotten how you used to beat me so mercilessly as if I were a mere animal?' Sukhraji asked Bhola with a trace of bitterness. 'Cleaning and sweeping after

everyone had already gone to bed. And getting up at four in the morning every day. Food had to be cooked just the way she wanted it, to perfection. One mistake and the terrible names she called me: *chinnar, kutia, haramin.*' Sukhraji turned directly towards Bhola, 'You never stood up for me, not once, even when I was innocent. You always took her side. Always the dutiful son. Remember how they taunted me when I did not become pregnant for three years? Barren woman, they said. Remember the day she gave me a piece of rope to hang myself so that you could marry another woman and have children. You stood there and said nothing.'

Bhola listened to this sudden, unexpected flood of memories with an aching heart. There was no reply to Sukhraji's bitterness and anger. She had spoken the truth. Yes, he was a dutiful son. He never stood up to his parents, especially his mother. He was her only son. Nothing, no abuse was worse for a man than to be called a hen-pecked husband. Keeping one's wife in line, even if it meant thrashing her occasionally, was one way of showing that he was the master of the house, the man in-charge, retaining his position in his mother's eye. Bhola reached for Sukhraji's bangled hands. 'Times were different, then. But all that is in the past now. We have built up our life together from nothing. This house, our children, our farm, our good name: all this we have done together. All this is just as much yours as it is mine. God willing, we will be together for a long, long time.'

Sukhraji was calmer now. The words had drained her. This was the first time, now that she herself was about to become a mother-in-law, that she had spoken so candidly about her traumatic past. This moment of release of the truth of their relationship somehow made her feel stronger, freer.

She was not bitter. Somewhere in her heart, she had forgiven her husband for his violent ways. Bhola had been a good husband and father. In any case, he was all she had.

A week later Bhola's older half-brother, Ram Bihari, came to visit him. Ram Bihari lived in Wailevu about seven miles away, but as the eldest, he was still the family leader. The family, the entire extended family all over Labasa, never took a major decision without his consent or involvement. He was there whenever he was needed. The family's public face and spokesman. After the customary cup of black tea, Bhola said, 'Bhaiya, time has come to get Dewa married. He is ready for a new life. If you know of any family...' Before he had finished Ram Bihari interjected. 'I know, I know. That is why I have come here today. Nanka told me about this in the market the other day.' Bhola was relieved. 'November might be a good time,' he said. 'By then, the rice will have been harvested and the cane cut with enough money for the expenses. And we will have about six months to make all the necessary arrangements.'

'I don't know anyone in Boca or Bucaisau,' Ram Bihari continued. 'There may be a few families in between I may have missed, but they can't be very important if I haven't heard of them. You know me.' Bhola did. Ram Bihari was well known throughout Labasa, knew everyone who mattered. He was president of his village Ramayan Mandali, member of the District Advisory Committee, patron of the Wailevu Primary School. He will find someone suitable for us, Bhola thought to himself and was relieved

'We are not looking for anyone special,' Sukhraji said from the back room, her head respectfully covered with a light shawl. Women always did that in the presence of strangers or family elders as a mark of respect and modesty. 'Education is

not important. What will we do with an educated daughter-in-law in a home like ours? And money is not important either. Girls from rich homes expect too much and cause trouble.' What Sukhraji wanted was someone from a respectable family, who would be a home builder, knew about *ghar grhasthi*. And then she thought of something else. 'As long as she is not *langdi-looli*, deformed, we will be happy. Someone wholesome like Guddu's wife.' Guddu was Ram Bihari's eldest son.

Ram Bihari said after finishing his cup of tea. 'I have heard of someone in Dreketi,' he said. Neither Bhola nor Sukhraji knew much about the place or anyone there. There was no sugar cane there, and people lived a subsistence lifestyle. '*Ek dam Chamar tola*, a real backwater,' Bhola laughed. 'Don't laugh, Bhola,' Ram Bihari chided his younger brother in his characteristic big-brotherly way. 'I know the place, I know people there.' Bhola had forgotten. Ram Bihari's oldest daughter was married in Seaqaqa, half way between Tabia and Dreketi. 'It is just a matter of time before Dreketi goes places. Tabia will be nothing then. I have heard about sugar cane farms opening there in a few years time. Then the Chamars will become Brahmins!' '*Na bhaiya, khali khelwaar men bol diya*, I was just joking' Bhola said, slightly embarrassed.

Ram Bihari of course had his own agenda. Another family connection in Dreketi would be good for him, more *daru-murga*, alcohol-meat, parties. The people there had a legendary reputation for hospitality, happily hosting visitors for weeks on end. If there was a 'Friendly North,' it had to be Dreketi. And his daughter would have another family close by to visit. Ram Bihari had Kallu's family in mind. He knew them well. He went there whenever he visited his daughter in Seaqaqa. Kallu had five daughters, only the eldest of whom

was married. Ram Bihari was smitten with Kallu's wife, Dhania. She was appropriately named after the spicy coriander plant, quick, witty, seductive and flirtatious. Openly so. She bantered, teased, and tempted with suggestive conversation. Dhania made men dance to the click of her fingers. Given a chance, I might be in luck, Ram Bihari thought to himself.

One day Ram Bihari pointed to the unploughed field next to the house. 'These fields haven't been ploughed for a while it seems. You could get a good crop of maize and lentils before the rainy season starts.' Dhania smiled without batting an eyelid. 'That's true. But what can I do? We have useless men here. They don't seem to have strong ploughs in the village any more. Maybe you could stay a few days and plough the fields.' The sensual innuendo was rustic and direct and arousing. Ram Bihari smiled at the thought. On another occasion, Ram Bihari remarked about the number of milch cows in the village. 'It's such a waste,' Dhania replied. 'Men here don't know how to drink milk.' Definitely good prospects here!

Once Kallu asked Ram Bihari about marriageable boys for his daughters. It was then that Ram Bihari had thought of Dewa. 'My daughters are my sons,' Kallu said proudly. They worked the fields, even ploughed the land, and cooked and cleaned at home. 'They know everything about homemaking'. What he didn't say was the daughters were also headstrong, independent and sensual free spirits. They were their mother's daughters. It was because of this reputation that people were reluctant to marry into the family. Ram Bihari overlooked this. 'I will do everything for you *bhai*. I feel like we are *rishtedaar*,' he said. Like relatives already.

'You should meet the family yourself, Bhola,' Ram Bihari told his younger brother. 'We will all go,' Bhola replied. Two

weeks later they hired Mallu's car and drove to Dreketi, Bhola, Ram Bihari, Nanka and Chillar, a village friend. Sukhraji wanted to go as well, but Ram Bihari objected. Bhola said nothing. 'Arranging a marriage is men's business,' Ram Bihari said with the authority of a family elder. 'Besides, it is a long trip.' Neither was Dewa invited, which was not unusual on the first visit. 'This is just the first visit, beta' Ram Bihari told Dewa. 'Of course, you will meet the girl when things get firmer.'

The party received a great welcome. Kallu spared no expense to see that his guests received the very best. A goat was slaughtered. Kava and rum were in plentiful supply. Dhania maintained a discreet distance after greeting the guests but smiling glances and seductive winks were exchanged with Ram Bihari. Munni, the girl to be married, brought in tea and savouries. 'This is the girl,' Kallu said. No one looked up. It was not the thing to do. Besides, there was little to see. Munni's face was covered with a white shawl. 'God willing, she will be our daughter soon too,' Ram Bihari replied. As the *agua*, he did all the talking. He was in his element. Bhola, always a reserved man, hardly said a word. Things turned out exactly as Ram Bihari had hoped. A return visit was arranged 'to see the boy.'

Only when the marriage arrangements were almost finalised that Dewa got to see his future bride. Kallu, Dhania and Muni travelled to Nasea on the pretext of seeing their relatives. There was a remote, very remote, chance that Dewa might decline. For a girl to be rejected at that stage would be disastrous for the family. Questions would be asked and reasons for the failure speculated upon endlessly. Kallu did not want to do anything that might jeopardise the chances of his other daughters. Dressed for the occasion in tight new green terylene

pants, red shirt and black shoes, Dewa was nervous. Over buttered bread and tea in Long Hip's cafe, he cast furtive glaces at Munni. She smiled shyly, showing her fine features. Wheat brown skin, full lips, perfectly proportioned nose and properly covered but ample bosoms. Dewa liked what he saw; he was hooked. Sukhraji, too was pleased. Munni, shy and dutiful-looking, would make the ideal daughter-in-law. The marriage pact was sealed. *Maarit pukka*.

Big wedding for the big boy,' Nanka said when Ram Bihari came to see Bhola a week later. 'The biggest the village has seen,' Ram Bihari promised. 'Big *dhoom dhadaka*. I will bring the whole of Wailevu down for the wedding. Then they will see what our family is made of.' Showing off the extended family was all a part of weddings. A display of family strength and solidarity. And it would do Ram Bihari's reputation no harm either. Bhola was anxious. He was not tight, but was not ostentatious either. Friends and neighbours in the village and extended family members was all that he had in mind for the occasion. A three-day affair, not a week-long celebration. He considered extravagant marriages a waste of time and money. He would have to borrow money to cover the expenses. And he had to think of his other school-age children. Yet Dewa was his eldest son, and this was the first marriage in the family. Besides, who was he to question his elder brother's decision?

The wedding was a big affair alright. Hundreds of people came. Three buses were hired to take the bridal party to Dreketi, with two taxis for the immediate family. For his part, Kallu too spared no expense. The best dancers and *qauwwali* singers were hired. Yaqona was in ample supply, and the food was plentiful and delicious: kadhi, puri, jeera dhall, kaddu, tamarind and tomato chutney. The guests were impressed,

even seasoned wedding attenders. 'So when's the next wedding, Bhola *bhai*,' one said. 'You have struck gold. Everyone deserves a *rishtedaar*, relation, like this.'

Sukhraji was emotional all week, a little sad at the thought of 'losing' her son to another woman. But she was composed when the bridal party returned. Munni looked so pretty, she thought, dolled up in a red sari, her hands and feet decorated with *mehdi*, the parting in her hair covered with *sindoor*. Momentarily, her mind drifted to her own wedding all those years ago. Women and young girls and boys peeked at the bride. Village women gave small gifts to see the bride's face. They would later comment on her complexion, her clothes and jewellery, the amount of bridal gifts she had received: the stuff of village gossip.

Sukhraji was proud finally to be a *saas*, mother-in-law. She helped Munni cook *kichadi*, a simple traditional dish of rice and dhall. This was the first dish that a bride normally cooks. It is more a ritual than a test of cooking, to show the villagers and relatives that the daughter-in-law could cook and would be a good householder. In the evening a goat was slaughtered and beer flowed for all those who had helped with the wedding preparations.

Over the next few days as guests and relatives departed, the tin shed was dismantled and large cooking pots returned to the neighbours. Life began to return to normal in the Bhola household. Remembering her own ordeal, Sukhraji was gentle with her daughter-in-law. Like a patient teacher, she introduced Munni to the way things were done in the house. The way Bhola liked his food cooked. The amount of ghee on his roti, salt in the curry, sugar in the tea. She introduced Munni to the neighbours, took her along to weddings and

birthdays in the village. She was in effect training her successor as the next 'mother' of the household.

Then things began to change. In small, petty acts of defiance Munni began to assert her independence. Munni washed her own and Dewa's clothes only. She ate her dinner alone in her separate house, without waiting for the menfolk to finish theirs. She hid away choice portions of meat for just the two of them. She refused to get up early to prepare breakfast for the family. Headaches and other mysterious ailments became increasingly common. Sukhraji noticed these things but was not worried. This was not how she had imagined things would work out but times were different and these were early days.

One day when Sukhraji asked Munni to massage her sore shoulder, Munni exploded. 'What's the matter with you? Ever since I have come here, you have been developing one sickness after another. Always expecting me to be at your back and call. Ask your husband to massage your arse. I am not your *naukarin*, servant.' With that, she huffed away into her house. Sukhraji was devastated, and began to cry. The complete unexpectedness of it all. The language, the temper, and the rudeness. Munni would have been skinned alive in days gone by. 'Maybe she is upset about something,' Bhola said to Sukhraji. 'I will speak to Dewa.' When Bhola spoke to him the following day, Munni had already told Dewa of the previous day's altercation. Dewa knew that Munni's complaints over work were exaggerated. He knew that his father always fetched water, and the boys chopped firewood. His mother washed her own clothes and that of his younger siblings. They all pitched in more than in most other households in Tabia. But out of a sense of solidarity with his wife he said nothing.

Dewa had something else on his mind. Tota, the next eldest, was in the first year of secondary school. Dewa resented that. He wanted Tota on the farm to do some of the work, so that Dewa could have free time of his own. 'Look at Tota,' Dewa said to Bhola. 'He is all suit-boot, and here I am busting my arse working for nothing. For whom? For what? What use would *his* education be for me? It will be good for all of us if he left school and worked on the farm.'

This hurt Bhola. He was speechless. He hadn't heard Dewa talk like this before. 'All this will be yours one day, Dewa,' Bhola said. 'You know this farm cannot support all of you. Educating the boys is not easy, I know. It is hard for all of us, especially you. But God willing, and with a bit of education, the boys will stand on their own feet. How can I can look in their eyes and stop them from going to school when we know there is no future for them here. God will not forgive us.' 'But what about me and my future,' Dewa asked? He was deeply embittered that he had been forced to leave school, although he was bright student, and made to work on the farm. 'You didn't allow me to complete my schooling,' he said accusingly. 'I would have made something of myself, instead of being a miserable menial.'

'I know, Dewa. But those days were different. Your mother and I wanted the world for you. But we were an extended family then. We couldn't decide things for ourselves on our own. Everything had to be considered properly. When they all decided that you should leave school, there was little I could do but go along.' He continued: 'I know you have been working hard recently. Why don't you and *badki* take a break. Go and visit Dreketi. Spend some time there. We will manage.' When Dewa mentioned this to Munni that night,

she was ecstatic. 'The sooner the better,' she said, 'before they change their mind, or something happens to your good-for-nothing brothers.'

Three days later Dewa and Munni went to Dreketi. Dhania grilled Munni on all the gossip, from beginning to end, *poora jad pullai*. Munni was unhappy. Something had to be done. Soon. Kallu and Dhania came up with a plan. They had more land then was of use to them. Much of it was lying fallow anyway. They could transfer some of the wooded land, perhaps ten acres across the road, jointly to Dewa and Munni. Dewa would provide a helping hand, There would be another male in the house, and they could all keep an eye on things. Munni would be the mistress in her own house, not a slave in another.

Kallu mentioned the proposal to Dewa and Munni the next morning. Munni could not believe her ears. Her own piece of land. Her very own house. She would be her own boss. 'This is a God-send,' she said to herself. But Dewa remained subdued. His lack of enthusiasm surprised everyone. 'What do you think, *beta*,' Dhania asked. 'This is good for all of us. You will have your own piece of land, your own peace of mind. And we will have a son we have always wanted.'

'This is wonderful' Dewa replied, betraying no emotion. 'It is a complete surprise. Let me think about it.' 'Take your time, *beta*,' Dhania said. 'There is no hurry.' Then she asked if Munni could remain in Dreketi a couple of weeks more. "We haven't seen each other for a very long time. Look at the poor thing. She desperately needs a break.' Dewa agreed.

Dewa knew from the very beginning that Dreketi was not for him. Hard work was never his suit. Clearing virgin land for crops would be no picnic. Getting by with as little physical exertion as possible was his motto. But lazy though he was,

Dewa was also a proud man. In Dreketi, he would be a *ghar damaad*, dependent son-in-law. His self-pride would be dented and freedom curtailed. He no longer would be a 'man' in his own right. And Dewa had his mind set on something else. To escape farm work altogether, he was taking driving lessons on Mallu's car to realise his ambition of becoming a bus driver. Easy work and the prospect of illegal income from short-changing illiterate passengers attracted him. Dreketi was a dead end for a driver.

Dewa mentioned the offer of land to his parents. They said little, hoping Dewa would remain in Tabia and eventually take over the running of the household. Besides, a *ghar damaad* was a lowly, despised figure in the community, much like a hen-pecked husband. But Ram Bihari encouraged Dewa to go. 'Times are changing, Bhola,' he said. 'Extended family under one roof with a common kitchen is a thing of the past. How long can you expect Dewa to remain with you? He will move one day, like my own sons. And he may not have an offer like this then.' But Dewa's mind was already made up.

In Dreketi Kallu and Dhania were doing their own scheming. They began to work on Munni, not that she needed extra persuasion. Tabia would always be a trap for her, they told her. Dewa's siblings were still of school age and she would have to look after them, and her own children when they came, for a very long time, perhaps for the best years of her life. And for what? When Munni mentioned the possibility of a separate household, Dhania countered, 'But where will you live? On a miserly plot of land, which won't be big enough even to grow baigan.' She continued. 'Yes, Dewa might one day inherit the land, but not while Bhola is till alive. He is fifty something now. Another twenty years. Another twenty

years of hell for you. And there is no guarantee that the other boys will not want their share as well.' Dhania pressed on. 'Think girl. How many times have you been to the town, to the cinemas. When was the last time you bought clothes for yourself.' How many times have you come to visit us since you have been married?'

Listening to her mother, Munni remembered why the family had been keen for her to get married in Tabia in the first place. She had been sent there on a mission to look for suitable husbands for her sisters. Teachers, clerks, policemen and men like that, in cash employment. That would be easier from Tabia than Dreketi. And she had dreams of regular visits to the town, to the shops full of fancy goods, movies, visits to relatives in other parts of the island. But all she had in Tabia was the deadening routine of daily household chores of cooking, cleaning and looking after everyone else.

'Leave him,' Dhania implored Munni. Her sisters chorused support. Kallu said nothing. 'We will go to Social Welfare. I know a Babu there. I will explain things to them. You will get a good monthly allowance. If they can't pay that — and you know they can't — you will have Dewa living with you here. At last you will be your own boss.' All this made sense to Munni. She could not lose either way. When Dewa returned a fortnight later to fetch Munni, the old proposal came up again. Dewa could not tell the real reason why he could never live in Dreketi. He talked half-heartedly about the difficulty of having to start from nothing. The bullocks and farm implements he would have to buy and the building material for the new house.

'They are our concern, *beta*,' Dhania said. 'That is our responsibility.' Still sensing his reluctance, Dahnia continued.

'It is noble of you to think about your brothers and sisters. But what about you and Munni, about your children and family?' Like a gushing tap, Dhania continued, while Munni sat with her eyes glued to the ground. 'You are giving your life, and Munni's life, for people who won't be there for you when you will need them. There is no future for you there, *beta*' 'Some day,' Dewa said politely, hoping to diffuse the palpably mounting tension. 'By then, it might be too late,' Dhania replied. It was clear that Dewa was stalling, his mind made up. Dreketi would have to wait. 'Get ready, let's go,' Dewa said to Munni. 'The bus will arrive shortly.'

'No Dewa, you go,' Dhania said to her son-in-law, taking his name to his face for the first time. 'Go back to where you belong. Munni will stay where she properly belongs.' Dewa looked toward Munni who kept her face averted. Dhania had spoken for her. Dewa left thinking all this a minor hiccup. They will come to their senses. They didn't. A month later, a letter arrived from Shankar and Company. Munni had filed for divorce.

4

Masterji

Some deemed him wondrous wise,
and some believed him mad.

Six o'clock in the evening is a special time in every Indo-Fijian home. The clattering noise of cooking from the kitchen and the shriek and laughter of children at play cease abruptly as the entire family gathers around the radio set. The bell announcing the death notice rings three times. Then the voice intones sombrely: '*Dukh ke saath suchit kiya jaata hai ki...*' It is with regret that we announce the death of ... The notice, the last of the day, is often long. When it ends, the volume is turned down and normal conversation resumes. Children scatter, and women return to their kitchen duties.

In Tabia, without electricity, running water or paved roads, where nothing interesting ever seems to happen, people are puzzled about the strange names of places they have never heard of before. Dabota, Tavua: what kind of place is that? Or Moto or Mangruru or Field 40? People wonder about the kind of Hindi spoken there, the clothes people wear, the crops they plant, the food they eat. Simla and Benares cause confusion:

how did Indian place names travel to Fiji? Since no one in the family, possibly the entire village, has ever left Labasa, strange places remain strange, imbued with mystery, tantalizing at the edge of comprehension.

If the dead person is vaguely known, there will be endless talk about family history. Connections will be made to distant relatives living in remote parts of the island. Invariably, at the end someone will know someone related to the deceased. The connecting game provides relief from the chores of daily routine, reduces the sense of isolation and remoteness. The death of a relative, close or far, is another matter. Work will be re-scheduled and preparation made to go to the funeral. People are particular about death; saying the last goodbye in person is a habit that has persisted. It is still the right thing to do.

We were sitting on the verandah of Mr Tulsi's Store early one evening, drinking kava and talking about the impending Ramlila festival, when the death notice came over the radio. *dukh ke saath...*' One of the names mentioned was that of Mr Ramsay Sita Ram. His address was given as Bureta Street, Samabula, a lower middle class Indo-Fijian suburb of Suva. Listeners were asked to convey the news to close family members whose names accompanied the notice. '*Kripeya is khabar ko...*' Judging by the silence that accompanied the announcement, Mr Sita Ram might as well have been a resident of Tabia. Mr Sita Ram was an early teacher at the Tabia Sanatan Dharam School. After a few years, he transferred to Wainikoro, or was it All Saints? He returned to Tabia in the mid-1960s to end his teaching career just as I was completing my own primary education at the school. After all these years, he was still a respected household name in the village.

I had Mr Sita Ram in the penultimate year of primary school. He was one of my more memorable, not to say eccentric, teachers. He was short, five foot nothing, fair, bald with an eagle nose, and an incessant smoker. We mischievously called him '*Chandula Munda*,' 'Baldie, Baldie,' because a bald man was a curious oddity in a settlement of men with full heads of hair. Mr Sita Ram did not live in one of the wooden tin-roofed teachers' quarters at back of the school but in Wailevu about five miles away. He arrived at school around eight thirty in the morning and left in his bottle green Morris Minor soon after the last school bell rang.

Mr Sita Ram was in his sixties when he taught us. To us he appeared very ancient, a relic of another time and place. Other teachers seemed to treat him with the mild affection reserved for a genial older uncle, past his prime, no threat to anyone's career, harmless but full of wisdom and an unrivalled knowledge of local history. To place children whose names he had difficulty remembering — Sukh Deo, Sambhu and Shankar Lal were all the same to him — he would ask us our fathers' or even grandfathers' names to establish our genealogy. His memory for this sort of detail was awesome (and awful) and frequently embarrassing. He would say 'Useless — *bekaar* — like your father and his father before him,' if someone got their sums wrong or could not spell a simple word or did not know who the prime minister of Bechuanland was. He knew all our secrets, our ancient family feuds, the disputes in the village.

When the mood seized him, he forgot whatever lesson he was teaching, and with the distant look of old men, focussed on something high at the end of the room, and talked about the past. We did not seem to exist. He was talking to himself, reliving his part of the vanishing past. Abruptly, he

would walk out of the classroom, light up a Craven A, stand on the verandah with his back to us and take a long, lingering puff that seemed to restore his peace of mind. He would then return and resume teaching. Effortlessly. I remembered this about Mr Sita Ram when I heard news of his death.

'A very good man,' Jack — Jag Narayan — said after a long silence. Jack, now a farmer, was the village historian whom people nicknamed Magellan for his insatiable curiosity about world events. He was also one of earliest pupils of Tabia Sanatan when Mr Sita Ram first taught there. 'They don't have teachers like that anymore.' Moti, another old timer now a driver with the Public Works Department, agreed. 'Do you see any books in their houses now? Have you ever seen a teacher read for knowledge and pleasure?' Moti asked. The ensuing silence distressed me because it was books which had helped me escape the village, connected me to other worlds and pasts. Without them I would have been nothing.

'Can't blame them, can you, bro?' Jack said. 'How can you, with the way things are? Poverty, political troubles, the land question. Everyone trying to migrate. Another *girmit* here, if you ask me.' That word *girmit*, the memory of indenture and years of struggle and degradation that accompanied it, had been on peoples' lips quite a lot recently, reminding them of the glass ceiling in the public service, the blocked promotions, the imminent expiry of leases, and the end of promise.'Child Our Hope' they write on the blackboard,' Moti said cynically. 'What Hope? Hope is Joke.'

The talk of decline depressed me. It was the same wherever you looked. The quest for excellence, the passion for learning and adventure and exploration, the burning of the midnight lamp, had vanished. The insidious virus of mediocrity

was quietly corrupting the nation's soul. I tried to steer the conversation back to Mr Sita Ram.'A name like Ramsay: how did that happen?,' I asked. 'What was a Christian doing in a Hindu school? You couldn't possibly have that now, could you?'

'Mix another bowl' Moti said, scratching his leathery, kava-cracked skin as he took a long puff on his *suluka*, rough homegrown tobacco wrapped in newsprint. 'Master will pay,' he said. I nodded yes.'His father was Ram Sahai, so he changed his name to Ramsay to sound like an English name. All so that he could get admission to All Saints,' Jack informed me. I was intrigued. This was news to me. 'You had to change your name to go to a European school?'

'The old days were different, ' Jack responded. 'It was British raj. There were just a few schools. One in Wainikoro, another in Bulileka, a few here and there. Children attended these schools for a few years, enough to read and write. That was it. But if you wanted to go on, you had to attend one of the Christian schools.' I was missing something. 'So what did people expect from the schools?'

'Our parents were illiterate, but not stupid, Master,' Jack said. 'They knew that without education we would be nothing but a bunch of coolies, good-for-nothings. Education opened doors to a good marriage. We could read the newspapers. We were frogs in a pond: how could we know about the world except through reading. Our parents could get us to read and write letters.'

Jack was beginning to hit full stride, when Moti interjected, 'Don't forget about the mahajans, bro.' That reference puzzled me. He continued, 'In those days, Master, our people did not know how to read and write. When people went to the shop, they let the Mahajan write the price of goods we bought in a book. We did not have cash. People bought things

on credit. They settled the account at the end of the month, in some cases at the end of the cane cutting season. Then, when the time came to pay, they got this huge docket — for things they had never bought. You complained, but it was your word against the written record. The police could do nothing. That's the way it was. Why do you think our people remained poor after all that back breaking work in the fields?'

Blaming others for your own misfortune is always comforting, I thought, and the oppressed are very good at playing victims. There were other reasons for poverty as well — the small plots of land people had, the restrictions the CSR placed on what they could or could not plant on them, the absence of cash employment, our own nonchalant attitude to work. I realised, possibly for the first time, that our quest for education was driven by this grim reality, to escape the rapacity of our own kind rather than by some grand vision for cultural enrichment and intellectual exploration.

How could someone like Mr Sita Ram from this kind of background, growing up in the middle of nowhere, in the shadow of indenture, on the edge of everything, become a teacher in the late 1930s? It was an extraordinary achievement, when you think about it. It was just about the highest job you could aspire to. And teachers were the pillars of the community, respected for their learning and for their role as moral exemplars. Parents voluntarily handed over to them the responsibility for disciplining the pupils under their care.

Mr Sahai was the reason for his son's success. He had been a sirdar in the Tuatua sector. There were some dark secrets in his past, Moti hinted, but it was hard to know what or whom to believe. Some said he was on the 'the other side.' Meaning with the CSR. But he wouldn't have been the only

one, playing the two sides to his advantage. Sirdars were chosen to extract the maximum amount of work from those under their charge, providing what someone has called 'lackey leadership.' When his indenture ended, Mr Sahai came to Tabia. He was one of the village's first residents. He knew the District Officer (a former employee of the CSR), and so was able to buy a large block of freehold land across the river by Shiu Charan's store.

In short time, Mr Sahai built up a big cane farm, employed people. Everyone called him 'Babuji.' Babuji could read and write. He wrote letters for the girmitiyas, read them, for a little something when they arrived. He arranged things for people, made connections with officialdom. He was the village agua, leader. From the farm and the gifts people gave him came the shop.

'You know how these people do business, Master,' Jack said. I didn't. 'Have you heard the story of the monkey and the cats?' No I hadn't. As I listened and reflected, I realised that I had assumed much about this place, but actually knew so little of its secret past.

'Once there were two cats,' Jack continued. 'One day they found a piece of roti. They decided to share it equally, but they couldn't trust each other to be fair. So they approached a monkey and asked him to divide the roti exactly in half. The monkey knew the trick. He deliberately split the roti into uneven sizes. Oh, this side is slightly bigger, he would say, so he would take a bite and kept on biting and adjusting until the roti was gone. 'That, Master,' Jack concluded, 'was how our Mahajans and Babus got ahead and moved about.'

'Don't forget Dozen and One,' Moti reminded him. 'Yes, Mr Sahai here was Dozen and One, too, along with Nanka

Boss in Laqere and Sukh Lal in Soisoi,' Jack continued. 'Well, Master, in those days, our people were not allowed to drink alcohol without a Police Permit. You had to be a man of good character, well connected and with money to get a permit. The permit allowed you to buy one bottle of spirit and a dozen bottles of beer a month. Mr Sahai himself was teetotaller, but he sold the liquor to people in the village. At twice the price. That is how he made his money. That is how they all made their money.' It was probably an exaggeration, but we had our share of rogues and swindlers, more than we cared to concede. 'Behind every success story is a secret story, Master,' Moti summed up with a laugh.

'Babuji was not keen to start this school,' Jack said. 'Why,' I asked? It seemed such an obvious thing to do.'Where will the teachers come from? Who will pay for the books? Where will you get land to build a school? Babuji asked these questions whenever people talked about education,' Jack continued.'You can't feed and clothe your own families. How will the people pay school fees and the building fund? We all want education for our children, but this is not the time. Plant more maize, rice, cane and vegetables. Have a few cows and goats and chicken. Poverty is our biggest enemy. This is our main problem. Schools can come later.'

People disagreed. They needed schools and educated children precisely to break the hold of people like Mr Ram Sahai and the unending cycle of poverty and hopelessness. A small start was made at the local kuti, community-cum rest houses, and rudimentary primary school started in 1945. From that came Tabia Sanatan.

Mr Sahai had other ideas for his own son. He enrolled him at All Saints Primary boarding school for boys in Nasea town.

Mr Sita Ram clearly remembered his father's words. 'Learn English good and proper, boy,' he had said. 'Learn the Sahibs' ways. See how white people rule the world. Learn their secrets. Open your eyes boy. Look. Farm work is coolie work. Make yourself a man. Keep our name high. Ram Sahai. Remember that.' Mr Sita Ram laughed when he finished recalling his father's words to me. The way the old man had pronounced it, Mr Sita Ram said, it sounded like 'Ram So High.'

But All Saints only accepted Christian pupils or at least those who did not object to Christian teaching. No problems for Babuji even though he was a regular speaker at pujas, marriages and funerals, knew the appropriate verses from the scriptures too, telling people that they must do everything to preserve their culture and identity. 'Without your religion, you are a rolling stone' he would say, bina pendi ke lotâ. In his own family, though, he was a different person. 'Religion doesn't put food on the table, boy,' he used to tell his young son.

And, so, Ramsay Sita Ram, at his father's behest, embraced the new faith though with no particular enthusiasm. He finished his grade eight at All Saints, passed the Entrance Exam and joined the Nasinu Training College to prepare for a career as a primary school teacher. His first posting was to Wainikoro Government Primary. After a few years, he came to Tabia.

Jack remembered Mr Sita Ram vividly. 'He taught everything: Hindi, English, Arithmetic, the whole lot. As a matter of fact, he was the only qualified teacher in the school.' 'Very keen on Indian history,' Moti volunteered. 'In those two or three years, we learnt by heart stories about Akbar and Birbal, about Jhansi ki Rani, about Shivaji, Tilak, Nehru, Gandhiji, Subhash Chandra Bose, the 1857 Mutiny.'

The list was impressive — and revolutionary. 'But weren't those books banned?' I asked, remembering how strictly the government controlled the flow of information, especially that which incited hatred against the British. The loyalty of the Indians was already suspect, and teaching about Bose and Gandhi would surely have been considered seditious.

'Mr Sita Ram got the stories from *Amrit Bazâr Patrika, Azâd, and Ghadr.*' Jack answered. His memory for names surprised me. It was for good reason that he was nicknamed Magellan! The parcel would be opened at the post office and its intended recipients put under surveillance, if not actually prosecuted and fined. I was perplexed how a teacher like Mr Sita Ram could get these papers, especially with a war on.

'From Chandu Bhai Patel, in Nasea town,' Jack said 'He got the papers smuggled in somehow.' In crates carrying pots and pans and spices and clothes. And a little baksheesh to the customs officials didn't go astray either. Say what you want about these Gujaratis, I thought, but they helped us keep our heritage alive at a time when we were down and out, at the edge, ridiculed and reviled, beasts of burden, nothing more. Without the Hindi movies, the newspapers, the music and the religious texts they imported, we would have become nothing, like the proverbial washerman's donkey, belonging neither here nor there. Na ghar ke na ghât ke.

Moti recalled another aspect of Mr Sita Ram's teaching. 'What did he say? All work and no play makes John a bad boy?' 'A dull boy,' I said. 'Something like that,' he continued. 'He taught us hockey, kabbaddi, rounders and soccer. Once or twice, we even took part in inter-school competition. Remember that Jack?' 'How can I forget!' Jack replied. 'Once Mr Sita Ram took our soccer team to Vunimoli. That was our

first outing. Boy, they were rough.' 'Nothing has changed,' Moti laughed.

'One big fellow, fullback, he kicked me so hard in the shin that I thought I had broken my right leg. Swollen like a big football. When father saw my injury, he thrashed me with a *chapki*. I ended up having both a sore leg as well as a sore arse!' he laughed. But his father did not stop there. Jack continued, 'Father put on his singlet and went straight to the school. 'Masterji, I send my boy to school to learn not to get his leg broken. I don't have money to mend his broken leg. Who will look after him? You? Stop this nonsense before someone gets seriously hurt. That was the end of my soccer playing days.'

Mr Sita Ram also insisted that students in higher grades should learn the basics and practicalities of good husbandry. Hands on experience, planting radish, carrots, tomatoes, baigan, cabbage and lettuce. So he started a Young Farmers Club. A special part of the school compound, by the creek, was set aside for gardening. Each student, or a group of students were allotted a patch, which they prepared and planted and nurtured, watering it morning and evening, erecting scarecrows to keep birds away.

'That wasn't popular in the beginning,' Moti recalled. Some parents were actually angry at this 'waste time' activity. He remembered Mr Ramdhan coming to school one day telling Mr Sita Ram, 'I don't send my boy to school to learn how to plant beans. I can teach him that myself better than all of you put together. We have been farmers since before you were born.' Mr Sita Ram did not say much. He smiled gently, put his hands around Mr Ramdhan's shoulder and said, 'Come Kaka, Uncle, let's have a cup of tea.' I don't

know what he said, but Mr Ramdhan calmed down, and walked away quietly.'

Some people thought that students would get to take home the vegetables they had planted. When they didn't, rumours spread that the teachers were keeping the vegetables for themselves, using school pupils for cheap labour. That was not true. Mr Sita Ram had other ideas. He used the money from the sale to buy books, pencils, writing pads for children from very poor homes, even uniforms, hiring buses for annual school picnics at Naduri or Malau. I could understand better now why his early pupils remembered Mr Sita Ram so fondly.

'So no one objected to a Christian teaching Hindu kids.' I returned to an earlier topic. 'Well, he wasn't really a Christian,' Jack said. 'He may have been,' Moti interjected, 'but it didn't really matter. He was a good man, a good teacher. As the old timers used to say, 'It does not matter whether the cat is black or white, as long as it catches the mice.' How things had changed. It would be difficult now to find a Muslim who is a principal of a Hindu school. And vice versa.

'This religious *jhanjhat* (trouble) is a recent thing,' Jack said. 'In those days, we were all one, like one big family. We ate together, played together, went to school together. We were all one.' He remembered the names of the different head teachers of Tabia Sanatan in its early days: Mr Munshi, Mr Ashik Hussein, Mr Mitha Singh, Mr Simon Nagaiya. 'Look at all this religious *katchkatch* (bickering) now. You call this progress, Master?' His voice betrayed regret and sadness at the way things had turned out. 'It is the price of progress, bro,' I answered feebly.

Over my remaining days in Labasa, I struggled with my own memories of Mr Sita Ram. I knew him when he was in his declining years, unconcerned about other peoples' approval or

about the school's success rate in external exams by which its public worth was measured. My memory of that period is dim. 'History matters, boy,' I recall him telling me one day after class. 'Memory is such a precious thing.' Our people's lack of curiosity about themselves, their past, the world around them, their non-interest in anything creative or imaginative, their penchant for petty, back-biting politics and myopic self-interest, distressed him immensely. 'Every home should have a dictionary, the Bible, Koran and the Ramayana,' he once told the class. Even in old age, his passion for discovery and exploration had not deserted him.

Nor his mischievous sense of humour. One day, Mr Sita Ram asked the class, 'Which is the greatest empire in history?' 'The British Empire,' I answered 'Correct.' 'Why does the sun never set on the British Empire? Remembering all the red spots on the *Clarion Atlas*, I remarked about its global reach. 'No, boy. The sun never sets on the British Empire because God does not trust an Englishman in the dark,' he said with a huge chuckle that shook his jelly-like stomach. We were all puzzled. I remember Shiu, sitting next to me asking in a whisper, 'Is that true? Why doesn't God trust an Englishman?' I had no idea, although Liaquat volunteered that the reason might be that English people reportedly used paper, not water, when they 'did their business.'

On another occasion, he was talking about the great monuments of world history: the Empire State Building, the Tower of London and Big Ben, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, the Golden Gate Bridge, the Pyramids of Egypt. Then he pointed to the grainy, black and white picture of the Taj Mahal in our text book. 'That', he said, 'is the greatest Indian erection of all time, never to be repeated.'

Mr Sita Ram also took our singing lesson. We were taught songs that we were expected to memorise and sing in class every month. We all had to take turns. It was awful, the entirely tuneless and screechy rendition of beautiful words. Most of the time we could hardly stop laughing hysterically at some poor fellow making a mess of things. The standard song of last resort was '*Raja Kekda Re, Tu To Pani Men Ke Raja....* King Crab, you are the king of the sea... For the truly vocally and musically challenged — and there were more than you might think — there was 'Baa Baa Black Sheep,' and 'Humpty Dumpty' and 'Jack and Jill.' Mr Sita Ram himself had a deep rich voice. We beseeched him to sing during every singing lesson. He obliged with songs by CH Atma, Manna Dey and especially Mohammed Rafi. His favourite — our favourite — was '*Chal Chal Re Musafir Chal, Tu Us Dunia Men Chal...* . Go Traveller, Go To That Other World... .

Mr Sita Ram was tolerant of potentially expellable misdemeanours. We all knew that Sada Nand and Veer Mati were sweet on each other. In class they exchanged coy glances and little hand written notes hidden in books: 'Roses are red, violets are blue...' that sort of thing. One day, someone reported this to Mr Sita Ram. Our hearts stopped. We knew that if he took this to the head teacher, Mr Subramani Goundan, Sada Nand would be severely caned (in front of the school assembly) and Veer Mati would be forced to leave school and married off soon afterwards. That was the way things were done in Tabia. But Mr Sita Ram settled the matter himself. He took the two aside one day after school and talked to them in a fatherly tone about their future and the foolishness of what they were doing at their age. When Sada Nand and Veer Mati married a few years after leaving school, Mr Sita Ram was the guest of honour!

Because Mr Sita Ram himself came from a relatively wealthy background — the Morris Minor was an undoubted symbol of prosperity — money did not matter much to him. On the contrary, he seemed acutely sensitive to the plight of others, especially bright children from poor backgrounds. He went out of his way to help them whenever he could, buying writing pads, pencils, paying school fees.

One day he talked about money and how our quest for it was so misplaced, leading us astray, away from the really important things in life, blinding us to its beauty. What he said remains with me. 'Money is not everything. Money can buy you books, but it can't buy you brain. Money can buy you the best food in the world, but it can't buy you appetite. Money can buy you the best cosmetics in the world, but it can't buy you beauty.' He went on like this for a long time, talking over our heads, talking to himself really. It was not until much later, after university, that I began to appreciate the profound truths of Mr Sita Ram's musings.

When we left the village for secondary school, and a few years later for university, we lost touch with our teachers and fellow students who had failed. But I ran into Mr Sita Ram in the Suva Market a couple of years ago. From a crowded distance, the bald, shrunken man sitting hunched on a wooden crate next to a vegetable stall, looked vaguely familiar. Coming closer, I knew it had to be Mr Sita Ram. When I spoke his name tentatively, he looked up, took a puff, and recognised me instantly. He stood up, even shorter than I remembered him, hugged me, slapping me gently on the back. 'Good work, boy, good work,' he said with the broad smile of a proud teacher.

'Have a bowl,' Mr Sita Ram offered. When I smiled in abstinence, he replied, 'You can have one now!' He asked about my parents and seemed genuinely sorry to hear that both had died. 'Good people they were,' he said, as he looked into the distance, recalling the past. As for the other boys, I had lost touch a long time ago, and so had he.

Mr Sita Ram told me he had retired a long time ago, and joined his children in Suva. Sometime in the late 1970s, the two boys had migrated to Australia and the daughter was married in Canada. His wife had died a long time ago. Mr Sita Ram had been to Australia a couple of times, but did not like it. 'A poked beehive,' he said, 'not a place for me.' 'Better at my age to be someone here than nobody there.' I understood what he meant.

I left Mr Sita Ram in the market, promising to keep in touch. But you know how it is: other commitments intervene and promises are forgotten. That was the last time I saw him. The news of Mr Sita Ram's death took me to a time and place I had nearly forgotten, reminded me of things that had quietly slipped into my subconsciousness, the kindness and generosity of people who paved our way into the world. People like Mr Sita Ram.

I went to Mr Sita Ram's basement flat in Bureta Street after I returned from Labasa. Why I have no idea, but felt it was the right thing to do. Perhaps the ancient urge to say the final goodbye in person. The landlord Ram Gopal invited me into the living room. After the customary cup of black tea, I asked about Mr Sita Ram's last days. Did he say anything? Were there any tell-tale signs of the impending end? Had he left any papers behind? 'Masterji seemed to be more reclusive in the last six months, more weighed down' Gopal said. 'What

really killed him if you ask me,' he continued unasked, 'was the coup.' The committed multiracialist, Mr Sita Ram had joined the Alliance Party after retirement. 'We all have to live together,' I remembered him saying all those years ago. 'Masterji read all the newspapers,' Gopal said, 'listened to the radio, he knew what was happening, what was coming. Another *girmit*, he had once said to me.'

Listening to Gopal, my mind wandered back to Tabia Sanatan and I remembered a patriotic poem that Mr Sita Ram had us memorize from one of Pandit Ami Chandra's Hindi pothis:

Fiji Desh Hamaara Hai
Praano Se Bhi Pyara Hai...

The Nation Of Fiji Is Our Homeland
More Beloved Than Life Itself...

These words helped me understand why Mr Sita Ram had lost his will to live, why the coup had broken his heart. As I was leaving, Gopal remembered a piece of paper on the bedside table on which Mr Sita Ram had written the first few lines of a haunting Rafi song:

Chal Ud Ja Re Panchi
Ke Ab Ye Desh Hua Begaana...

Go, Fly Away Little Bird
This Place Is Not Your Home Anymore...

5

Across the Fence

To meet, to know, to love — and then to part
Is the sad tale of many a human heart

A new man has moved in across the fence. He walks past our shop every morning for his daily walk. Then around eight or so, he gets into his new four-wheel drive Toyota and goes to work. I presume it is to work. He is always immaculately dressed, in suit and white long sleeved shirt, wearing stylish green glasses. He must be either a lawyer or a doctor. Twice a week, he picks up a loaf of bread from our shop on his way back from his walk. There is just a barely perceptible hint of a smile as he says thank you and leaves. He is polite and graceful, softly spoken. He must be from abroad. His hands are soft, fingernails perfectly manicured. He is probably in his late forties or early fifties. Sometimes, I want to talk to him, just to get to know a little bit more about him, but he is shy and retiring. I want to ask his name, what he does, where his family is, whether he has a family, the sort of things neighbours want to know. But he may get the wrong impression that I am 'too forward.'

I am a stranger myself in Cuvu. We are from Labasa, from Wainikoro. Our lease was not renewed. Like so many others, we had to leave. But there was nowhere to go. My husband had a distantly related uncle in Cuvu. All his children had migrated, leaving only him and his elderly wife to look after the shop. They were making preparations to join their children in Vancouver, but they wanted to keep the shop, just in case things did not work out for them. We will run their store while they are away, and I will continue teaching, part-time, at the local secondary school until things settle down. If they ever settle down.

We have made a good start. We had established customers. People are friendly and curious about us. They admire our determination to make a go. If only people here worked as hard as you people, they say. There is something about Labasa people. People say we are humble and genuine, that we have kept our culture and language alive, untainted by Western influence. They invite us to their weddings and birthday parties. They try to make us feel welcome. Life settled into a routine after a few weeks. The novelty of welcoming new migrants wears off, and you are left alone to get on. It has not been easy since Vinesh, my husband, had a stroke about three months ago. The absence of close family and friends nearby during a crisis like this hurts deeply. There is no one to turn to, no shoulder to cry on. Sometimes, the loneliness can be overwhelming. I do everything by myself: manage the accounts, do the banking, keep track of the stock, make sure that Priya does her homework, prepare for class, and keep the household running. I often wish there were more hours in a day.

Early one morning, a little girl from across the fence comes to buy bread. So the man has a family. I ask the girl's name. 'Shirley,' she says. She speaks with a distinct Western accent. She probably has no Hindi at all. 'And you are from where, Shirley?' I inquire. 'Vancouver,' she says. 'And your parents, are they here with you as well?' 'No, just my mum and me. We are here for a holiday.' 'And that man is your?' 'Uncle. Uncle Viru.' 'And what does Uncle Viru do?' I have no idea why I am asking this little girl all this but I am getting curious about the man. 'He is a physician.' That's Canadian for doctor, I learn later. Now, his smart dress makes sense. 'Come back again sometime and meet my daughter, Priya. She is your age. I think you two will get along well.'

Later that afternoon, Shirley returns. 'Come over and play with me,' she says to Priya. 'Can I go, Mum?' 'Yes, but don't be too late. I have to go to town later.' A doctor from Canada, in Cuvu, all by himself? Like us, he is a newcomer to this place. Perhaps his wife and children will join him soon. 'Mum, you should see the inside of the house,' Priya says to me as soon as she returns. 'Yes.' 'The books. Sooo many of them. Big, thick books all along the wall. And DVDs and CDs. Must be billions of them.' 'Oh, come on now, Priya.' 'Mum, seriously.' Books and music and a medical doctor. That is a strange and rare combination of taste and talent. Here, even teachers don't read anything beyond the set texts. No time, they say. No time to spare from grog and gossip, that is.

A few days later, Shirley comes to the shop with her mother. A stylish woman, in her mid-thirties, short black hair, knee-length dress, floral top, probably from one of the tourist shops in Nadi. Not flaunty or flamboyant, but definitely someone who has lived abroad for some time, I realise. 'Lovely

girl, Priya,' she says. Nice, soothing, slightly Western-accented voice. 'Thanks. She can be a real terror sometimes though.' I extend my right hand across the counter. 'Hello, I am Meera.' She reciprocates, her palm as soft as a baby's bum. She must be someone from a 'soft' occupation. 'Sorry, Hi, Geeta,' she says switching her handbag from her right to her left hand. Well spoken, educated. 'On holidays, Shirley tells me.' 'Yes, our second trip in five years. Holiday and to see Viren.' 'Shirley's uncle I take it?' 'Yes, her Mama. My cousin.'

'Time for a cup of tea or are you in a rush?' I ask hoping she will stay. I give her a pleading look. Geeta seems so vibrant, so full of life. 'Mum, remember lunch with Viru Mama,' Shirley reminds her mother. 'He's sending a car soon.' Geeta looks at me, shrugging her shoulders helplessly. 'Tomorrow will be perfect, if you are not busy,' Geeta volunteers. Busy! I wish. 'Tomorrow lunch then,' I offer. 'Nothing fancy, something very simple.'

I can only do lunches these days. Rural stores have a rhythm. There is a fairly heavy flow from around six to eight-thirty, nine. People come for the basic necessities: bread, butter, milk, eggs, onions, potatoes, kerosene, newspapers, lighters. There is hardly any activity around midday. Mid-afternoon, after school, the rush begins again, with schoolchildren buying lollies, ice-cream, ice blocks. By about eight, it is time to close shop. Thank God. By then, I am almost dead to the world.

The doctor, Viren, is on my mind. I feel confused and guilty. I want to know more about him. I know I shouldn't. It is not right for a married woman to look at another man, let alone think about him long into the night. Things haven't been easy since Vinesh's stroke. No woman should have the joys of her married life snatched away so cruelly, in the prime

of her life — not even your worst enemy. All the dreams about travel, picnics at the beach, swimming in the sea, late-night parties, making love whenever the mood seizes: all gone. All the foregone pleasures when children come along cannot be revived. With a stroke, of course, it is longing and desire and passion with no prospect ever of consummation.

It wasn't always like this though. Once I truly loved and admired Vinesh. He had done the unthinkable for someone from his family background. He had married me, a South Indian. His father had threatened to disown him, hang himself if he married a 'Madraji.' The extended family had protested that he was setting a bad example for his younger siblings and cousins. 'Khatta Paani' is what they called us-dark-skinned people with little culture or class, an inferior type. But he had stood steadfast. I meant the world to him. He has never betrayed me, for which I am grateful. I have wonderful memories of love and lust together, the dark nights by the river and the cane fields, the excuses we devised to get away from people to be just by ourselves in bed, but they are just that, memories. They are not enough to carry me through the day.

I wonder if Geeta eats curry. That's the only dish I can cook properly. I won't make it too hot. Duck curry: that should be a delicacy. Mung dhall, tomato chutney, a bit of raita with cucumber, in case the food is too hot. Chappatis. For dessert, chopped watermelon and pineapples with a squeeze of lemon to cool things down. And masala chai to finish it all off. I haven't been nervous like this for years. I feel as though something important depends on the lunch. I want it to be a success. I want to make an impression. I can barely wait for Geeta and Shirley to arrive.

Geeta is punctual, neat in her hibiscussy dress and maroon top, her short wavy dark hair tied in a small bun, sunglasses across her forehead, her smooth face glistening gently with hints of perspiration. 'Here's something for dessert,' she says, handing me a large packet of rich Swiss chocolate. So sweet. 'You carry your Canadian custom too far for us country people here,' I said, but not actually meaning it. I wish our local people would show greater courtesy and consideration. 'Oh no, it's nothing.' Priya asked for a large bottle of soda before disappearing into her bedroom with Shirley.

Geeta and I sit on the back verandah, keeping an eye on the shop, and enjoying the cooling sea breeze off the coral coast. 'The place has changed a lot since you came here last?' I ask, trying to start a conversation. 'Heaps,' Geeta replies. 'Most of all, mobile phones. I can't believe that almost everyone has one, including taxi drivers. And they send text messages to the radio stations. Just the other day, I was amazed to listen to someone from Los Angeles requesting a song on at ext message!' Geeta had just returned from Nadi. 'That town is practically unrecognizable. The duty-free shops, the range of fab goods they sell, the exquisite handicraft. And you can get a decent cappuccino now. Five years ago, it was that dreadful black mud that passed for coffee.' 'It's all thanks to you guys,' I say. 'Keep coming back.'

'And you? Been here long?' Geeta asks. 'A couple of years.' 'From?' 'Labasa.' Geeta looks perplexed. The idea of people moving about within the country is new to her. 'That's another change then. We stayed put when we were growing up. For us Ba folks, Labasa was a strange country which existed only in name, where people spoke a strange language stranded in t he p ast, a nd v ery s imple.' 'I n a ni ce w ay,' s he c hecks

herself, knowing that I am from there. I explain our situation. 'That's one thing I can't get over about this country. It can never be our home. We will never be allowed to claim it as our own,' Geeta says angrily. 'That's the way things are around here,' I say. 'No use complaining. Make the most of what you have, and hope for the best.'

Geeta was a nurse, which explains her soft, delicate hands. From Suva, she had married and accompanied her chartered accountant husband to Canada in the late 1980s. The marriage ended. 'I am sorry,' I say in sympathy. 'It's not the end of the world,' Geeta remarks in a matter-of -act way that is surprising as well as refreshing. 'It happens all the time.' She had her daughter, and she had an extended family which was close. None was closer than Viren. 'He's like an older brother to me,' she said, 'loving and protective. I don't know what I would do without him, especially Shirley.' I envy Geeta her freedom and opportunity — and most of all her closeness to Viren, and his warm sheltering of her.

'Viren moved here several months ago,' I say, 'but we don't really know him. He comes to the shop for the usual things, but that's about it,' I say, hoping Geeta will talk more. 'He's on the quiet side, unless he knows you well,' Geeta says. 'And then he is a non-stop chatterbox,' Shirley pipes up from the end of the verandah. What will make him open up, I wonder. I want to know more about Viren but should be careful not to show too much interest, nothing to cause suspicion at this early stage, to send the wrong signal.

'Duck curry!' Geeta almost shrieks. 'I haven't had one in years.' 'Yum,' she says, as she takes a piece of meat between her thumb and forefinger and sucks on the gravy. 'You're a great cook, Meera,' she says appreciatively. 'Really.' 'It's a hobby and

a habit,' I say. I have been doing this all my life, but it is good to get appreciation, to get noticed. Vinesh, well, he hasn't noticed or done anything for years. My domestic work is taken for granted, but that is nothing unusual around here. Women's fate, they say. Any excuse will do. Taking your partner for granted can be the cruellest cut of all.

'Shirley is so fond of her uncle,' I say, hoping to prod Geeta to talk about Viren. 'Is he from around here?' Geeta took the bait. 'Viru is from Ba, but he grew up in Canada. His parents [my Mama and Mami] migrated there some time in the late 1960s. They were among the earliest Fiji migrants to Canada. Viru is their only son. He did medicine and worked at the local hospital in Surrey, which is where most of our people in Vancouver live. He has been a practising physician for nearly twenty years. He could have climbed the ladder, gone places, but Viru is not like that.' I am happy that we are on the right track now.

'So what is he like?' I ask nonchalantly, trying not to give too much away. 'He's a free spirit, always seeking that extra something in anything he does. He works five days a week at the hospital, but runs extra free consultations on the weekends. He volunteers for the St John's Ambulance, is with the Red Cross. He plays and sings at fundraising events for charities — you know, Blind Society, Handicapped Children, that sort of thing. And, of course, he is my closest friend. Shirley spends all her spare time with him. I don't know what we would do without him.' Those words again. He seems too good to be true, but maybe there are people like him out there in the world that I don't know about.

'Never married?' A delicate question, I realise, but not out of place in the flow of the conversation. 'He was, to Kala.'

'From Fiji?' 'Yes, but like Viru, raised in Canada. A beautiful girl, so talented.' So there is a past, a history. 'What happened?' 'She was killed in a skiing accident in Banff. That's the main winter resort in western Canada. They were married twelve, maybe thirteen years.' 'No children?' 'No. Kala had life-threatening complications and they both decided not to risk her health.' He would have made a great daddy, I say to myself. What a great loss. I feel for Viren.

'So, how did this Fiji thing come about?' I ask as we sip masala chai. 'Canadian doctors have a volunteer scheme for developing countries. There is always demand for doctors in Africa, Latin America, parts of Asia. You put your name forward, fill out the forms, indicate your country of preference and wait. Viru chose Fiji. He got it. For many the really exotic places are Central America and Africa. You know, the Albert Schweitzer thing.' I had no idea who this person was, what he had done, why he was popular among doctors, but nodded knowledgeably, hoping she wouldn't ask me about him. 'And so he is here. Actually, your Medical Department chose Sigatoka for him.'

'I wonder why he chose Fiji when he could have gone to so many other places. I mean, Fiji? Everyone is leaving Fiji.' All the violence and turmoil, and this man wants to come here? 'But he has always wanted to come to Fiji, and this was the perfect opportunity.' I couldn't help wondering loudly, 'Why?' 'He is from Fiji, but like so many of us, he hardly knows the first thing about the country. How did we get here in the first place? What was *girmit* all about? Why is there so much trouble in this country? You can read about all this in the papers, but it is not the same thing, Meera.' Return voyage of self-discovery. Sounds so airy-fairy to me. 'I suppose you can afford it if you

have the money.' Luxury of the rich. My curiosity increases.

'What about you, Meera?' Me? What about me? The question takes me by surprise. 'One day at a time, I suppose. We'll run this store for a while. It's not much, but at least we get by. People are friendly. Priya likes her school.' 'And Vinesh?' She had noticed him lying on the bed on the back verandah. I wish she had not brought his name up. Sometimes, it is good to escape the grim reality of our lives, think of happy things and forget about unhappy moments. 'A stroke. There is some movement in his right leg, but the left side of the body is gone. It is not like overseas here. And we don't have the money to take him overseas for treatment. We will just have to live with it. That's life, isn't it?' I hope I did not sound too depressed or despairing.

Time flew as our conversation ambled on. By the time we had had tea, it was nearly five. Just as we were getting up, there was a knock on the shop door. It was Viren! 'I am sorry, ma'am, but I am looking for Geeta. We had planned to go to Natadola this evening.' 'No, I haven't forgotten,' Geeta says as she rushes to the front door. 'Come on, Shirley, Mama is here.' 'Viru, you have met Meera, haven't you?' 'Well, yes, sort of. Hi, I am Viren,' he says, shaking my hand. 'Hi,' is all I am able to manage. Soft hands, gentle squeeze. I avert my gaze.

'Mum, can Priya come with us. Pleease!' Shirley pleads. Geeta looks at me. 'We'll be back in about two hours,' Viren says encouragingly. Priya was tugging at my hand, looking into my eyes for permission. 'Can I, Mum?' The little girl hardly goes anywhere, has no one to play with after school. Really, this place is like a prison for a small child. 'Only if you promise to behave.' 'Promise! Promise!' 'Would you...' Geeta asks me. But before she could complete her sentence, I said, 'No, no,

I can't. This is a very busy time of the day, and I have to give Vinesh a bath. Piyari, the house help, as taken the day off. But thanks. May be another time,' I say knowing that another time is a dream.

Natadola. It's ages since I have gone there although we live just half an hour away. Picnics and swimming and walking were never big with Vinesh. Beer with the boys was more his scene. But now all that's gone. Getting him out of bed is a challenge; getting him to go anywhere is a major expedition. He gets irritable, angry, frustrated, as if saying: why me, what have I done to deserve this? Why indeed, the poor man. My normal outing is from this place to the town, occasionally to the mandir or a puja during day-time. You have to be careful in this place. A poor man's wife is everyone's sister-in-law. Our reputation is all that we women have.

Priya was ecstatic. 'Mum, it was so good. Uncle Viru is so much fun.' 'Oh, Uncle Viru, eh? Since when? And what did this Uncle Viru of yours do that you are all ga-ga about him.' 'We swam. We splashed water on each other. We played soccer on the beach. We had coconut and ice-cream on the way back. He's such a kind man, Mum.' I am glad that Priya likes Viren. I sincerely hope she sees more of him. I hope he likes her too. This beautiful girl deserves all the fun she can have. Kind man, yes, but also probably very lonely. I wonder whether he misses his family, what goes through his heart as he tries to find himself in this place.

Geeta must have told Viren about Vinesh. Next day, early in the afternoon, they came over. 'Will I be able to see Vinesh?' Viren inquired. No pleasantries. Pretty direct, very doctor-like. 'Go right in,' I said as Geeta and I went into the kitchen to boil the kettle. Half an hour later, Viren returns and

sits at the kitchen table. Both Geeta and I are all ears. 'CVA — sorry, Cerebrovascular Accident — that's the technical name for stroke of a fairly common kind. It is called schaemic stroke.'

'Translate, please,' Geeta teased Viren. 'Stroke occurs because the blood supply to part of the brain is totally or partially blocked through build up of a clot or through particle or debris from one part of the body travelling in another where it should not be,' Viren explains. Very much the doctor. No emotion. 'People with diabetes are particularly at risk. There are other more severe types of strokes, such as haemorrhagic stroke caused by bleeding in and around the brain, but fortunately, that is not the case here.' Then Viren asks me about Vinesh's pre-stroke health. 'Heavy smoker, fatty food, drinks, you know, the good life.' Viren shook his head. 'That's what they all think.'

'It must be hard on you,' Viren said to me. There was touching concern and sympathy in his voice. He was the first one in a long time who had spoken to me like that. Tears well up in my eyes. I am embarrassed, but I can't help it. 'With all that physical disability and emotional highs and lows and low self-esteem, the sleeplessness, the sores, the irritability, the panic attacks, the irregular bowl movement.' Viren was choosing his words carefully, almost clinically. He is a doctor after all. 'Complete recovery is impossible, but Vinesh can improve.' Yes, I live with that hope, but sometimes hope is not enough. I want a miracle.

I look straight into Viren's eyes, asking how? He reads my mind. 'Through occupational therapy, relearning daily activities such as eating, drinking, bathing, dressing, toilet, help with language and speech, returning as much as possible to the routine of daily life. Regular monitoring of temperature, blood pressure and sugar level. Emotional support is very

important. Post-stroke depression can be very dangerous, fatal even. You must not make the person feel as if he is a burden.' I hope to God that I haven't.

Then checking himself, making sure he had not come across as a doctor talking to a patient, Viren said, 'I am sorry to sound so formal. I can see that you have been taking good care of Vinesh. Things can only improve from here on. He is a very lucky man.' Luck: what price, I think to myself. If only Viren knew the hell I go through every day just to keep us afloat. And Vinesh is not the easiest of men to please. Nothing is ever good enough for him these days. I should be at his beck and call twenty-four hours. He grills me whenever I go out to buy goods for the store: who I have seen and talked to. He throws a tantrum when he sees me speaking to male customers at the shop. He thinks I am having affairs. God, I sometimes wish that were true. 'I will send some antidepressants tomorrow,' Viren says as he leaves the house. I am sad to see him leave. It is so good to have adult conversation.

A few days before she returns to Canada, Geeta invites me to lunch at Viren's. Just the two of us. It is salad, sandwiches and soup. 'Something different,' Geeta apologises. 'Wouldn't dare try curry with you around.' I am flattered. We get along so well. I feel there is an unspoken bond between us. She understands my situation and feels for me, without any hint of pity or condescension. She knows that she will leave and return home. She has a place to go back to, to look forward to: friends, family, job. And I will go on as always, on my treadmill of daily routine.

The rooms are full of books and music as Priya had said, books along the wall, foreign magazines and newspapers, clippings friends have sent scattered on the floor of the

reading room. CDs of music with Western names I don't know — Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Vivaldi — and dozens of Hindi ones by Lata Mangeshkar, Mohammed Rafi, Mukesh, Talat Aziz, Mehndi Hasan, Chandan Das, Jagjit and Chitra. I recognise all the songs on the covers, of course, songs of love, loss and longing, of times and places long forgotten, lodged deep in the memory. 'Books and music keep Viren going,' Geeta says. 'A hopeless romantic at heart, he is.' Nothing wrong with that, I say to myself. God, we could all do with more romance in our lives.

'Viren will miss you,' I tell Geeta. 'Shirley more than me,' she replies instantly. 'That girl means the world to him. She can do no wrong in his eyes. Spoils her rotten. She sleeps in his bed, they often eat from the same plate. It's a strange bond, very special.' So Viren has a warm heart as well. 'Viru is also very fond of Priya, you know. He says she's cute, very bright.' 'That's so nice of him.' 'And he admires you too, you know.' I look straight into Geeta's eyes, searching for any hints. 'The way you run the shop, look after Vinesh, the way you are raising Priya. It's not easy, especially for a woman.' Pity, sympathy, probably more than admiration, I think. I was hoping for something more, but then he hardly knows me.

'Can I go to Viru Mama's house?' Priya asked me a week or so after Geeta and Shirley had returned to Canada. 'He is not your Mama.' 'But Shirley calls him Mama.' 'That's different.' I don't have sisterly instincts towards Viren. Far from it. I am confused, but there is a deeper desire and longing that I can't quite describe, a desire for closer attachment perhaps, even romance. To sit together in the unlit night listening to syrupy songs, picnics at the beach, long walks in the mountains, movies. 'Call him Chacha.' Father's younger

brother or cousin with whom a joking or even a sexual relationship is permissible. That way, no roads are closed. 'Or simply Uncle. But not Mama.'

Priya and Viren get on like a house on fire, as they say. 'Chacha said this, Chacha did that.' She was almost possessive about him. 'My Chacha,' she would say to children at school. She once invited him to school to give a talk about Canada. She was so proud. Everyone adored him and the girls envied Priya. The two go swimming together at the beach, to the town on Saturdays. He cooks for her, and they watch movies together. Once or twice she has slept over. After years of neglect and the physical absence of fatherly attention, Priya is beginning to blossom. A child's innocent heart and pure love are truly wonderful things to behold. I often wonder about Viren and Priya, what they talk about, the games they play. I sometimes desperately want to be a part of that company, but Vinesh would disapprove. He disapproves of so many things these days. Besides, I don't have the time.

I now look forward to seeing Viren on his early morning walks, his sweaty athletic body striding in the distance, head covered with a baseball cap. He picks up his bread and morning papers, smiles his innocent smile, asks after Priya and Vinesh and then leaves. He is concerned about Vinesh. That much I can see. The other day, he brought some antidepressant pills along with a small booklet explaining the different kinds of stroke, thrombotic and embolic and others I forget, and their diagnosis and therapy.

The two have struck up a chord. Vinesh can be (and recently has been) irritating and stubborn, but he is not dumb. The two talk mostly about the past. Viren is keen to know how things were done in the 'old days.' The marriage

ceremonies, the funeral rites, the celebrations of festivals, the text books students read. 'Try some of the retired head teachers for the books,' Vinesh advises, but there is no luck. 'We don't have a sense of the past,' Viren says to Vinesh one day. I agree. Getting by or getting on top by hook or by crook is the story of our people. Vinesh now looks forward eagerly to his talks with Viren. It is good to have him around, just his physical presence.

Next morning, Viren was up for his walk as usual. 'I am having a party for some friends this Saturday. I would like you to come, Meera.' This was the first time Viren had ever taken my name, and he looked straight into my eyes, unblinking. My heart missed a beat. Inside, I felt as if I was meeting a man I had always wanted to meet. Something is happening, but I can't put my finger on it. It is something I felt all those years ago when I first met Vinesh, the same flutter, the same anxiousness, the self-consciousness whenever Viren was around, wishing always that he would prolong his visit, any excuse to talk to him.

'Of course,' I replied excitedly. 'Not sure about Vinesh, but Priya and I will be there.' 'No, Priya is coming over on Friday!' says Viren. 'You two are something else. Lately you seem to be the most important person in her life,' I say. That is the truth. I am of course delighted with the developing bond between the two of them. Viren smiles, still looking at me as he prepares to leave. Saturday is two days away. 'What's on the menu?' I ask hesitatingly. I don't want to appear intrusive. 'I will think of something. There is still time.' 'Leave that to me.' 'I can't possibly do that.' 'This is Fiji, not Canada, doctor-ji. We could go shopping tomorrow afternoon.'

We do, just the two of us. Priya is still at school. It is so good to be driven, not to have to worry about all the crazy

drivers on the road giving you the dirty looks, not to have to bother about parking. Viren is a polite, careful driver. Nice aftershave. 'Nice day,' Viren says to me, looking ahead, his hands firmly on the steering wheel. We are both avoiding eye contact, both acutely self-conscious of being together in a confined space, but I like being physically close to him. There is something reassuring about that. 'That time of the year,' I say. It is May. We head for *Rupa's Fresh Foods*. Viren pushes a rattling wayward trolley. 'Like your cars,' he says to me and laughs. 'I thank our potholes and mechanics,' I add smilingly. We buy three kilos of fresh goat meat, two kilos of king prawns and from the vegetable section, garlic, onions, ginger, coriander leaves, tomatoes and hot chillies. We don't say much to each other. We don't need to. That is the beauty of it all, the understood silence.

Mid-morning Saturday, I walk over to Viren's to cook. Everything is properly stacked: the plates, the bowls, the kitchen towels, the stove squeaky clean. He hasn't done this just for me, has he, I wonder. He makes me a coffee as we plunge into the cooking. Viren cuts the onions in thin strips, and crushes ginger and garlic. 'Medium hot?' I ask. 'Oh, the normal.' 'No one eats goat in Vancouver,' Viren says, 'but it is so delicious. So lean.' He's trying to create conversation. I smile. 'Well, you will have to come to Fiji more often, won't you?' I add. 'I would like to,' he says. There is touch of hesitation in his voice. I look straight at Viren, but he averts his eyes and moves away from the kitchen. By mid-afternoon, the cooking is all done. 'See you around seven,' I say as I leave. 'It's our party, yours and mine together,' he says gently as he opens the front door.

What to wear? I feel like a girl about to make an appearance at an important or glamorous party. Red Salwaar, orange *dupatta* will look good and red *bindiya*. A dash of Opium. Gold bangles and my favourite gold necklace, a gift from our wedding so many years ago. I tie my hair neatly in a bun, and lightly brush with powder the faint worry lines on my forehead. 'Mum, you look great,' Priya says, hugging me. 'Chaccha will be really pleased.' 'Will he?' Why am I asking a little child this, I catch myself thinking. 'How do you know?' 'C'ause I know,' Priya replies with a mischievous smile. 'Yes, always the know-it-all, eh.' I stroke Priya's hair.

'Don't be late,' Vinesh says from his bed. 'I am not feeling well.' When do you feel well, I say to myself angrily. Can't I have a moment of fun without you spoiling it for me? Lately, he has been behaving strangely. He disapproves of Priya sleeping over at Viren's. And he does not like me talking to him much either. He doesn't say much, but his body language gives him away. No doubt, he thinks I am having an affair with Viren or something close to it. He knows I have never betrayed him. Sometimes, his sullen looks get too much. Then, I wish I were actually having an affair. But it is always a guilty, fleeting thought. Nothing, no one in the world, is going to spoil this evening for me.

Guests are already in the verandah when I arrive. A European couple, a Japanese medical consultant and a doctor from India. People compliment me on my dress. 'That's the thing about this place,' Mrs Lansdowne says, 'so splendidly, joyously, colourful.' 'Fiji: a resplendence of colours' would be a nice description of this beautiful country,' David, her husband adds. 'How long have you known Viru,' Mrs Lansdowne asks me. I note the hint of familiarity. 'A few

months.' 'Related?' 'No, just good neighbours.' 'We miss that here, friends dropping by for an afternoon cup of tea or just a chat.' Viren is a great host — polite, playful, courteous — and good at light conversation. When he goes to the kitchen to fetch a bottle of wine, Mrs Lansdowne says, 'He is a most wonderful man, you know.' I know. Looking at David, she says with a wink, 'Lucky you came before him.' 'Ah! Lucky is my middle name, dear.'

Viren behaves as if I am the hostess of the party. I like the attention. I haven't felt like this for years. The banter, the easy laughter, the lightness of touch, the familiarity of friends, wide-ranging conversation, the welcome attention. It is a special evening. Once or twice, I catch Viren looking at me from across the head of the table. Unresisting, I return his gaze. There is a gentle smile in his eyes. I feel warm all over. Yes, it is our party together. It is our secret.

Guests leave around midnight. Priya is asleep on the couch in the living room, the remote control still in her hands. I envy her innocent peace. I wash the dishes and Viren dries them. It all feels so natural, as if I have known Viren for ages. Then we return to the veranda with our cups of coffee. The night is soft, silent, except for the occasional croaking of frogs, and the moon is caressed by gentle, passing clouds. I wish Viren would touch me, hold me close to him. It has been a long time. He is in an easy chair, gazing into the moonlit distance, sipping coffee.

'So how have you found this Fiji of ours?' I ask. 'Your first trip?' 'Yes, actually.' This takes me by surprise. People travel so much these days, and Viren is not short of money. 'Any reason?' 'My father didn't want to return, and we didn't persist. I know many families which have never returned.' The

hurt perhaps, the guilt of leaving desperate relatives behind, the struggle in the new homeland. I had heard similar stories from returning relatives before. 'Why now?' I ask. 'The Canadian volunteer scheme provided the perfect opportunity.' 'Like the Peace Corps?' We have some Peace Corps teachers at school. 'Yes, something like that, but more professionally oriented: doctors, engineers, those sorts of people.'

'Any relatives in Fiji?' I ask. It is then that Viren tells me about his visit to Ba, which had splintered his heart. He had gone there for a week, to Vatia, in 'search of my roots,' as he put it. His father, Ram Shankar, once a primary schoolteacher turned insurance agent, had worked there. Younger people at the Ba Hotel, where he stayed, had no knowledge of local history. No one knew his father. Inquire with the rural shopkeepers, someone suggested. He did. At first people seemed reluctant to talk, or tried to change the subject or pretended ignorance. Viren persisted. Then one day, the story seeped out, slowly at first and then in torrents. Ram Shankar, the insurance agent, had blackened his name through a notorious series of arson cases in Ba about thirty years ago. Several shops in the town burned down over four nights. Arson was suspected. The shopkeepers, all Gujarati, were supporters of the cane strike so they could get the farmers in greater debt than they were in already. In retaliation, so it was said, a group of incensed anti-strikers burned down the shops. No one was ever caught. The shopkeepers claimed insurance from Ram Shankar's insurance company.

The true story emerged years later. The wooden structures were old and rotting. The shopkeepers wanted them pulled down. They bribed Ram Shankar. He got their insurance papers in order, overestimating the value of the

houses by thousands of dollars. And then he hired his cousins to torch them. Everyone knew the truth but was too afraid to report it to the police. Ram Shankar had everyone in his pocket or under his thumb, not a man to be crossed or treated lightly. If he himself didn't intimidate people into submission, he had friends who did. It is difficult to believe this story that such a gentle and caring man as Viren could have such a brutal father as Ram Shankar.

Ba was Ram Shankar's place in more than one way. He belonged to a group of wealthy and well-connected men — big landlords and moneylenders — for whom the village women from poor homes were playthings. They could have anyone they wanted, and they did. Ram Shankar made one of them pregnant, but denied paternity. No one could do anything about it. Reporting the matter to the police was out of the question; that would bring only more trouble. And the local village advisory committee was in Ram Shankar's pocket.The girl was hurriedly married off into a poor home. 'You should meet your illegitimate brother,' an old man had remarked acidly, spitting out rough tobacco. 'He could do with some help, the poor fellow.'

Parmesh lived on the outskirts of Moto, a poor casual labourer, a hired cane cutter in the cane harvesting season. Viren was bitterly ashamed of his father, leaving a woman pregnant with his child, just like that. 'How cruel can you be?' he said. 'Even animals acknowledge their offspring.' Viren said nothing about who he was. 'It broke my heart to see my Parmesh in a state of abject poverty, torn clothes on his body, his children working as hired labourers even at their tender age. The look of desperation in their eyes. Their future is dead.' 'Did you say anything?' 'What could I say? There was so much I wanted to know about my brother's background, his

journey, whether he knew who his real father was. Perhaps he didn't. It was better to leave the past in its grave. I gave him the hundred or so dollars I had on me, and promised to send him funds regularly. Why this generosity from this complete stranger? he must have wondered. Or did he, like me, know the truth but thought it best not to bring it up? It would have been too painful to find out.'

Parmesh was not Viren's only discovery in Ba. He also learned that his mother was his father's second wife. He had divorced his first wife with whom he had two daughters. 'Divorce was worse than death in those days,' Viren says. You became an outcast for life, living in suffering and sufferance, a free domestic helping hand, little more. His wife and daughters were packed off to their parents' place near Vaileka. She never remarried and died a few years ago of tuberculosis. 'A whole life destroyed, and no remorse, no regret,' Viren says. 'My father never said a word about all this. What a stone-hearted man.' 'What about the daughters?' I ask. 'I wish I knew.' No one in Ba knew when or where they were married, whether they were still alive. 'A part of my past is lost forever, gone' The visit to Ba explained to Viren why his father had so few friends in Canada. Even close relatives had kept their distance from him. It made sense to him now why all these years Ram Shankar had refused to return to Fiji, to connect Viren to his roots. The door was slammed shut on Fiji, secrets kept from the family until now.

Viren is devastated by his father's secret past. Fiji has lost its charm for him. I touch his forearm. 'All this has nothing to do with you, Viren,' I say in sympathy. 'We all have skeletons in our closets.' What hurt Viren most was that the memory of his father's deeds were still remembered and

recalled bitterly by the older generation in the village. And the discovery of his half-brother and his step-sisters had overwhelmed him. 'They don't deserve this,' he said. 'I wish I had known about this earlier.'

'I will be leaving the day after tomorrow,' he says after a long silence. His words strike me like lightning. 'For how long?' I ask, dreading the answer. 'For good.' 'I see,' is all I can manage. 'Nice to have met you. Priya will miss you a lot.' 'I will miss her. And I will miss you too.' 'Me? What have I done?' I ask, looking into his face. 'I don't know where to begin. Perhaps it is better not to say anything,' Viren replies. 'We don't have much time. And knowing the truth won't hurt.' 'I admire the way you juggle so many things: the store, Priya, Vinesh.' Is that all he thinks about me? I feel irritation welling up. 'I can do without pity. We women are not as helpless as you men think or believe.' 'I did not mean it that way. You are a very attractive woman, Meera. Just because I didn't say anything to you doesn't mean I did not notice you. I noticed you the moment I first saw you. What man wouldn't?'

I am touched but feel a 'but' coming. 'I wish times were different, things were different,' Vinesh says in a voice choking with emotion. 'Yes, it is always like that, isn't it?' Why does it have to be me? 'Vinesh loves you. More, he needs you. I couldn't possibly hurt Vinesh. He does not deserve that, not in his present state. He doesn't have anyone besides you. You are his everything.' I have my needs too. What about my needs? Does anyone ever think of that? 'I truly wish things were different, Meera, but they are not.' I see tears welling up in Viren's eyes. 'You will always be in my heart.'

I will be very sad to see Viren leave. He gave me hope, made me feel special. I felt young again, full of life. I looked

forward to his morning walks like a girl in love. The comfort of his presence, the vague anticipation of better things to come. His gentle, caring ways. But it's all in the past now. It is best for him to leave. Fiji will always haunt him, and he will be destroyed by it. He doesn't deserve that. There is nothing I can say or do that will lessen his pain. We both stand up spontaneously and hug each other. A long, warm hug. Viren's shoulder is wet with my tears. I feel his strong athletic chest against mine. I can almost hear his heart beat. I must leave.

I see a strip of glowing light appearing on the horizon. Another dawn is breaking. Soon the bread truck will arrive and it will be time to open for business.

6

A Gap in the Hedge

We go back a long way, you and I,
through a gap in the hedge, across a field,
through a gate we forgot to close...

Hugo Williams

Ram, my best friend, is unwell. High blood pressure, failing kidneys and rampant diabetes, have all taken their toll on his health. 'Not long to go, Bhai,' he said to me the other day, managing a characteristically resigned smile. He is living by himself, alone, in a one bedroom rented apartment in Bureta Street, a working class suburb of Suva. I visit him most evenings, have a bowl of grog, and talk long into the night about the old days. Both he and I know that the end is near, which makes each visit all the more poignant. As Ram often says, repeating the lines of Surendra's immortal fifties' song, *Hum bhor ke diye hain, bhujte hi ja rahe hain*, we are the dawn's candle, slowly going out (one by one).

Ram and I go back a long way. We were fellow students at Labasa Secondary in the late sixties. He was easily the best

history and literature student in the school. He knew earlier than anyone of us what *Lord of the Flies* and *Lord Jim* were about, the two books we were studying for the exams. I often sought his assistance with my English assignments, and helped him with geography, at which he was curiously hopeless. I still have in my library the final year autograph book in which he had written these lines: *When they hear not thy call, but cower mutely against the wall, O man of evil luck, walk alone. 'Ekla Chalo,'* in Mahatma Gandhi's famous words, "Walk Alone".

We both went to university on scholarship to prepare for high school teaching in English and History. I went on to an academic life while Ram, by far the brighter, was content to become and remain a high school teacher. One day we talked about Malti. 'I wonder where she is now,' I asked. 'Married and migrated,' Ram said. 'No contact?' 'No. There was no point. It was all too late.' Ram and Malti were an 'item' at school. Their developing love for each other was a secret we guarded zealously. We knew that if they were caught, they would be expelled, just like that, no compassion, and no mercy. Labasa Secondary was not for romantics. It was a factory which prepared students for useful careers, its self esteem measured by the number of A graders it had in the external exams and where it ranked in the colonial educational hierarchy with other notable secondary schools: Marist Brothers, Suva Grammar and Natabua High.

Malti failed her university entrance exam, and her cane growing parents were too poor to support her at university. Jobs in Labasa were few, so Malti stayed at home. Ram was distraught, but there was little he could do but go to university. At the end of the first year, he received a sad letter from Malti telling him that she was getting married to an accountant at Morris Hedstrom. After all these years, Ram still had the

letter, quoting lines he had once recited to her. *You will always be my light from heaven, a spark from an immortal fire.* 'Byron, did you know?' I didn't. 'You are the poet, man. I am a mere garden variety academic.' Then Ram recited Wordsworth's Lucy poem: *A violet on a mossy bank, Half hidden from the eye.* Such aching pain, endured through the years.

After completing university, Ram married Geeta. Both were teaching at Laucala Bay Secondary. Geeta came from a well known Suva merchant family. She married Ram not out of love but convenience, I always thought, after her long love affair with a fellow teacher had come to an abrupt end. Ram was a good catch, a university graduate, well spoken, handsome, employed, and well regarded. Geeta was stylish, opinionated and ambitious. But Ram was in no hurry to get anywhere soon. He was happy as long as he had his books and his music. Whatever money he could spare, he would spend on books ordered from Whitcomb and Tombs in New Zealand and Angus Robertson in Sydney. He was probably the most deeply and widely read man in Fiji, a far better student of poetry than some of the post-modern pretenders at the local university.

In 1984, Ram was transferred to Lamolamo Secondary. Geeta tried hard to persuade him to reject the offer. Her father interceded on their behalf with the Chief Education Officer (Secondary), but without success. Even a bottle of *Black Label* failed to get the desired result: teachers were in short supply and, worse, the new fellow, too earnest for his own good, seemed strangely impervious to importunities of any kind, including the *daru-murga* variety (dinner-drinks). Ram feigned disappointment to Geeta, but was quietly pleased at the prospect of spending some time in the west, among country

people whom he liked so much, away from his intrusive in-laws, away from the soul-destroying, incestuous 'socials' on the Suva teachers' cocktail circuit. He told Geeta that the transfer was just another step to better things and before they knew it, they would be back in Suva.

Lamolamo was a rural hinterland, smack in the middle of the cane belt of Western Viti Levu. The living quarters at the school were spartan, the water supply and electricity erratic, roads unpaved, food cooked on open fire, clothes washed by hand in the nearby river, drinking water fetched from the well. 'Living hell,' is how Geeta described her new home to her parents and friends in Suva. The slow rhythm of village life was well beyond her. The other teachers at the school were from western Viti Levu and spent their weekends with their relatives attending weddings and birthday parties, but Geeta had no close relations nearby, no one she could properly socialize with. 'Rurals' was how she contemptuously described the village people, rough, lacking in elementary social graces, plain. '*Tan ko sahoor nahin haye.*' No manners whatsoever.

Ram revelled in the village environment, re-living the vanishing world of his rural childhood in Labasa. In no time, he had made friends in the village. He loved attending Ramayan recitals in the evenings and having a bowl of grog or two with the people at Sambhu's store. People asked him for favours: filling forms, writing letters to families who had migrated, giving advice about education. Ram was a regular and much honoured speaker at weddings and funerals. '*Masterji aye gaye haye,*' people would say, Master has arrived, sending shrieking school children into immediate respectful silence. 'You should stand for election, Master,' Kandasami suggested one day. 'We will support you, no problem.'

A political career was furthest from Ram's mind, but he appreciated the invitation. '*Retirement ke baad men dekhe khoi.*' We'll see after I retire. The topic kept returning.

Geeta resented Ram's after-school life. He would often return late, usually with a few friends, for an evening of grog and bull session. She would be expected to cook dinner. 'I also work, in case you have not noticed,' she would tell Ram after his friends left. She would often retreat to her bedroom and Ram would heat up the food himself. The silences between the two were getting longer, more sustained, eye contact averted, conversation more and more strained. The physical intimacy of the early years was long gone.

'You have been stuck in this job all this time. Why don't you apply for promotion?' Geeta asked. She had in mind head of department, assistant principal, and then finally the top job at some decent suburban school near Suva. 'But I love what I am doing. I love being in the classroom,' Ram replied. 'Geeta, you should see the way the children's eyes light up when they finally get something. Today, we were reading 'The Snake.' Such a beautiful poem, don't you think: Lawrence gets the cadences, the nuances, the slithering subtleties.' Ram usually spoke about literature the way he wrote prose: complete sentences, words carefully chosen. Poetry was the last thing on Geeta's mind.

All the pressure, the nagging, finally did it. Ram gave in and accepted the headship of the Social Science Department. Soon afterwards, all his horrors of headship materialised. One of his teachers was having an affair with the head girl. This had been going on for sometime, but Ram being Ram, was the last one to know. Charan Singh, the principal, was adamant: the offending teacher would have to go. 'One rotten potato

can ruin the whole sack,' was how he put it. 'But where will he go? He will be finished for life. We can put a stop to all this. Just give me one chance.' Ram remonstrated. 'Too late for that, Ram,' Charan Singh replied with a firm tap of the finger on the desk, signalling the meeting was over. 'He should have thought about his future beforehand, kept his trousers zipped.' 'Come on, it hasn't gone that far, Mr Singh' Ram reminded him. 'Could have! Then what?'

Reluctantly, Ram broke the news to Prem Kumar, who had just turned twenty two. The head girl was eighteen. He had to go, and he did. 'I am sorry Prem,' was all Ram could manage. Ram was troubled for a long time. 'It's so unfair,' he thought aloud to himself. 'One mistake, just one, and your life is over in the blink of an eye lid.' He decided there and then that he would not apply for further promotion. 'If I want power, I will become a bloody politician,' he resolved to himself.

'This is my kind of place, Geeta,' Ram said when she asked him again to seek a transfer from this 'rural hell hole,' as she put it. There was a vacancy at Nadera High for a vice-principal. 'I am at home here, at peace. Look at those mountains.' He was referring to the craggy Nausori Highlands in the background splitting Viti Levu in half. 'The play of light on them at dusk. It's majestic. After this, who would want to be in Suva with all the rain and the dampness and the mosquitoes? 'But I will be closer to my parents.' 'That's what holidays are for, Geeta.' 'It is not good enough. You have your friends here. I have nobody.'

Before Ram and Geeta could resolve the deepening impasse between them, Sitiveni Rabuka struck with the first of Fiji's four coups on May 14 1987. The school closed for a month. Ram and Geeta returned to Suva to be with Geeta's

parents. There were unconfirmed reports of gangs of thugs terrorising Indo-Fijian areas of the city. In Geeta's parents' house, there was turmoil. Once the talk was of promotion and transfer, now it was migration. 'Everyone is leaving. Just look at the long queues in front of the Australian and New Zealand Embassies,' Geeta's father said. Ram had seen the long lines, and been moved by the look on the faces of people in the scorching May sun. 'This place is finished. *Khalas sab kutch.* We Indians have no future here,' Geeta's mother chimed in. 'We have talked to Sudhir, and he has agreed to sponsor you. We will come later.' Sudhir was Geeta's older brother living in Auckland.

Ram was torn. He knew he could not leave Fiji, yet he also could not ignore Geeta's wish. The closeness between the two had gone, but he still wanted to be with Geeta, more out of habit and obligation than anything else. But the faces of the villagers in Lamolamo also haunted him. 'Where will they go?' he kept asking himself: no means, no connections, unskilled, tethered to their farms all their lives, coping without help or hope. 'I can't leave them now when they need me most,' he told Geeta one day.

Geeta was unmoved. 'That's the problem with you Ram. You always put others before me, before us. *Sab ke pahile, aapan ke sab roj baad men.* I don't know what magic have the village people done to you.' Time was of the essence. David Lange, the New Zealand prime minister, was quietly allowing Fiji people to enter New Zealand without the usual stringent visa requirements. 'We have to do something now before it is too late. Who knows when the doors will be shut?' 'You go and I will follow later,' Ram said unconvincingly. 'If that is what you want,' Geeta replied, knowing full well that Ram would be

the last person to leave Fiji. She knew in her heart that their married life was over.

Ram returned to Lamolamo as soon as the school re-opened. He taught his share of classes, but he was far more troubled by what was happening to the country and to his community, being gradually wrapped in the descending veil of darkness and despair, as he put it. People in the village peppered him with questions when they met for their usual grog sessions at Sambhu's store. A state of emergency was in force, the newspapers were censored, and radio news in Hindi bland amidst funereal music and sad songs. But in the countryside, *Rumour Devi and Messers Fact and Fantasy* were running wild. There were reports of people being picked up at night and interrogated at the military barracks, forced to walk bare feet on scorching tar sealed roads for miles, made to drink drain water, forced to crawl on rough pebbly ground, masturbate in front of others. Ram had heard the rumours, too, but did not know the truth.

Then, one day in town, quite by accident, he came across a copy of *The Fiji Voice* at Master Mohan's place. Mohan, a retired head teacher, was in contact with the union people in Suva. The newspaper, the brainchild of Sydney journalist and trade unionist Dale Keeling, printed hard hitting news censured in Fiji, especially news about the rampant abuse of human rights. Ram became a regular and avid reader, and related its troubling contents to the villagers at the shop in the evenings, to the slow shaking of heads in utter disbelief that such atrocities were taking place in Fiji. *Biswaas nahi hoye ki aisan cheez hiyan kabhi hoye sake*, people said. Sometimes, he used the school photocopier to make copies for people in neighbouring villages. The more sensational

abuses reported in the newsletter were translated into Hindi. People were confused and bewildered and helpless, powerless witness to their own paralysis and guilty impotence.

'You are banging your head against a rock, Ram,' his colleague Satish had remarked. 'Don't get me wrong, bro. I know the coup is wrong and all, but sometimes we have to accept reality too.' 'Yes, that's what they all say,' Ram replied, slightly irritated. 'That is what they all want us to accept, commit political suicide voluntarily.' He continued 'Where would we be if we had accepted that the Britishers were going to be here forever? Where would the world be if they had accepted the 'reality' of Hitler's master plan?' Ram had thought about this and rehearsed his arguments carefully. 'No, the reality thing does not do it for me. It's a cop out, man, and you know it.'

'All that the Fijians want is to control the government, Ram,' Satish said calmly. 'That's all. You give them that and they will leave us alone. These are not a bad people, you know.' 'Not at the point of the barrel of a gun. No. Do you really think they will leave us alone? An inch today, a foot tomorrow. Today they take our government away, tomorrow it will be our homes and businesses. We have to stop this cancer now before it destroys us all.' 'You are an idealist, Ram,' Satish said. *Unsudharable*. Unchangeable. 'Better that than a neutral — or shall I say neutered — armchair 'realists' like you folks, Satish.' Ram remembered Gandhiji's words: *A no muttered form the deepest conviction is better and greater than a yes muttered merely to please, or what is worse, to avoid trouble.*

'Remember, all the guns are on the other side, and you know who will be killed first when the shooting starts, don't you?' Satish continued. 'Just look around, Ram, and tell me

how many of these *chakka panji* (hoi-polloi] will follow you into the battle: a handful, if that. Your problem, man, is that your head is always in the clouds, lost in lofty thoughts. Get real for once. *E kuaan men panni nahi haye, bhaiywa.*' This well has no water, my friend. 'It is easy sitting here in our cushy chairs with our monthly salaries and long holidays and pontificate, do nothing, accept things as they are,' Ram said. Well that is not good enough for me.' There were times when Ram felt like Sisyphus rolling his stone up the mountain, but there was nothing else he could do. The struggle had to go on. *Still we persist, plough the light sand, and sow/Seed after seed where none can ever grow.*

The people of Lamolamo were incensed at what had happened, ready to erupt like an overheated furnace. The village was a close knit community. It spoke as one on most things. It was known far and wide for its single-minded solidarity. This was also Labour heartland. For many Mahendra Chaudhry, the Labour leader, was their guardian angel. They had waited for so long to be in government, only to thrown out after a month. One day at Sambhu's shop, they decided to form a small committee to map strategy. *Ek dam kuch kare ke padi.* We absolutely have to do something, all the villagers resolved. Ram Baran, the village *mukhia*, headman, was on it along with Shafiq Ali, the owner of several lorries, Buta Singh, a large cane grower, and Chinnappa Naidu, the leader of the South Indians. Every cultural group was represented. Ram was invited to join. In fact, he was the one who had mooted the idea.

In the months after the coup, things went from bad to worse. Rabuka's belligerent Christian rhetoric compounded fears. His words on Radio Fiji sounded ominous. *I appeal to all Christian leaders to concentrate on evangelising Hindus and*

Muslims' he thundered. That was the only way for permanent peace in Fiji, if everyone believed in the one God, Jehovah. Hindu and Muslin festivals might not be celebrated as national holidays. Fijians must do what the Christian missionaries had done: convert heathens to Christianity. *I would be guilty in the face of God if I did not do that, if I did not use my office, my influence, to get the Church, those who believe in Lord Jesus Christ to teach his love and what he stands for.*

Wild rumours spread in the village about forcible conversions, especially of children. Ram tried to calm fears. 'It's all talk, cheap talk,' he told people at the shop one evening. 'The white missionaries tried this before during *girmit*. No success. Think: if they did not succeed, will these fellows? Converting cannibals was one thing. Us? Never.' People nodded amidst bowls of kava. 'We are Sanatan Dharam, *bhaiya*. *Koy khelwaar ke baat nahi haye*,' said Bhola. Eternal, without beginning or end, indestructible, nothing to trifle with. 'What will Christians give us that we don't already have?' '*Patthar*, useless stones, rubble,' Ram Jiwan piped up from the back.

Within a week, talk of conversion had turned sinister. One night, while people were meeting at the shop, the *Shiv Mandir*, the main village temple, was trashed and about $25 in donations stolen, the prayer book burned and idols smashed. The radio reported more desecrations in Tavua and Rakiraki, including the desecration of a mosque. 'How low can these *kuttas*, dogs, Go, Master?' Mahavir said to Ram, 'What have our gods done to Fiji that they deserve this?' He began sobbing. It had taken him and a few others a very long time to build the *mandir* from scratch, with hard-earned donations collected at *Ramayan* recitals. Now all gone.

Ram was ropeable. 'No use crying, bro. We have to do something.' People looked in his direction as he spat out the words in embittered anger. Like what? 'We should torch one of their bloody churches,' Piyare suggested. '*Jaraao saale ke*. I will do it myself.' 'No,' Ram advised. 'No, we should guard the mandir and our homes with physical force. We should form a group and take turns every night.' A vigilante group is what Ram had in mind. 'They touch one finger, we chop off their hands. These people only understand violence. If they want to fight, we give them a fight.' *Cowards die many times before their deaths; The valiant never taste of death but once*.

These were fighting words from a man of peace whose first love, preceding and leading to Malti, was English poetry. Something deep had stirred in Ram. Reports of daily humiliation, petty discrimination, the taunting and the threats, the steady drift of the community into the limbo between life and death, had had their effect. He was like a man possessed. 'How dare these bastards do this to us,' he said to Satish one day. 'Our forefathers built this place up with their bare hands. This is our home too. And they think they can take away our rights, just like that, and we would do nothing. Hell no. Over my dead body.' 'There will be many dead bodies before this evil saga is over, Bro,' Satish replied. 'This is *Kalyug*, after all, remember.' The cosmic Dark Age.

People were with Ram. Young men armed with polished mangrove sticks and sharpened cane knives patrolled the village. They protected the temple and would have beaten to pulp anyone caught attempting desecration. Some of the young men described themselves as members of the *Bajrang Dal*, soldiers of Lord Hanuman who had single-handedly rescued Sita from the clutches of Ravana. '*Dekha jaai ka hoye*.'

'We are prepared for whatever happens,' the young men said. Nothing happened for months. The attacks had been condemned by leading church leaders, even by Rabuka himself. The thugs had made their point, their anger subsided. People relaxed and went back to their old routine.

But just as one crisis was over, another emerged. The Sunday Ban came into force, banning all sports and work on Sabbath. There was no public transport on Sunday. You couldn't bury the dead, wash clothes in the open, organise weddings or social gatherings without official permission, or work in the fields. Opinion in the village was divided. For Ram, as always, it was a matter of principle. 'No one has the right to tell me when to rest. This is a free country. And since when has Sunday become our day of rest?' There was the farming angle to consider as well. 'If we don't harvest on Sunday, what happens when the wet weather starts? The mills won't operate after December.' Suruj Bali said. 'Forget about harvesting *yaar*,' Bhola chimed in 'we won't have taxis on the roads, no buses, nothing. What if we have to go to hospital?' 'Once again, we poor people get caught in the middle,' someone added. *Phir garib log ke upar sala museebat aaye*. But some of the casual labourers who usually kept quiet, actually welcomed a rest on Sunday. They had nothing to lose. *Is me hum log ke ka kharabi haye?*

One day, Bansi organised a large Bhagvata Katha at his place to mark the first anniversary of his father's death. The entire village was invited to the ten day affair. It was not an act of defiance, though Ram thought it was. It was thought that such a harmless religious activity would be of no interest to the authorities. They were wrong. Late on the second day, a truck load of soldiers arrived. After making enquiries, they

took Bansi and his eldest son Jamuna away. Both returned home late in the evening in a hired cab, their bodies bloodied and bruised, lips swollen from punches, pants soiled. 'Next time we catch you,' the soldiers had warned them, 'you will find yourself in a morgue.'

How did the military find out what was happening at Bansi's house in the middle of nowhere? Ram wondered. Obviously, there were spies among them. But who? Ram suspected Jumsa, an excessively deferential unemployed young man, who attended all the meetings, listened intently to everything that was spoken but never said a word. Often he volunteered for anything the village committee decided. But there was no proof. Only much later it was revealed that Ram Baran, whose spy Jumsa was, had quarrelled with Bansi over a land boundary and lost the court case. This was his opportunity to take revenge and gain favour with the military chief for western Viti Levu, Aisake Mualevu. Unknown to anyone, this respected leader of the village, the chairman of the village coup committee, in whom everyone reposed trust and confidence, was also the military's eyes and ears in the settlement. A sheep without, a wolf within. *Haraamzada*. The labyrinths of betrayal and deceit ran deep in the roots of our community. *Is there not some chosen curse, Some hidden thunder in the stores of Heav'n, Red with uncommon wrath, to blast the man, Who owes his greatness to his country's ruin?*

With no signs in Suva of the crisis resolving, talk increased of putting more pressure on the military regime. The leaders decided that there should be a boycott of the cane harvest. 'We must bring this illegal regime to its knees,' one of them said. 'Why should we pay these bastards to put their boots into us?' 'When we ask for sanctions from overseas, we must be

prepared to pay a price ourselves.' 'Sacrifice begins at home.' 'We broke the CSR's back with our strikes,' someone said 'what is this?' *Saalan ke nas maar de khoi.* Well shall teach the bastards a lesson, reduce them to impotence. Brave talk of defiance and determination began circulating in the village. Ram was quietly pleased at the way people were beginning to stiffen. His occasional doubt about their resolve began to dissolve.

A meeting of the village committee was convened to firm things up. The usual pro-harvest boycott arguments were rehearsed. Ram took the minutes. Buta Singh, the biggest cane farmer in the village, who had remained quiet through out the meeting, spoke when everyone had finished and a vote was about to be taken. 'Why is it that whenever there is any problem, the farmers are the first ones to be asked to make sacrifices? No one comes to help us when we are down, when there is a drought or a flood or hurricane or fire.' All eyes were on him. 'Will the trade union babus making so much noise now sacrifice a single cent from their salaries? Will the big businesses, which suck our blood, close their shops for even one day? Will they? Then why ask us to be the first ones to be in the frontline?' *Kahe khaali hum kisan log ke sab se aage pahile bheja jaaye haye?*

'*Hum log ek chota kund ke megha haye*, Sirdarji,' We are frogs in a small pond, Ram Samujh responded after a long, stunned silence following Buta's blunt words. 'Our leaders will never ask us to make sacrifice unless there is no other way. They are one of us. *Hamai log ke admi to haye.* We have complete faith in them. Cent per cent.' 'Buta,' Shiu Ram said sharply, 'you are worried about saving your pennies when the whole country is going to the dogs. All these nice buildings, nice farms, tractors: what's the use having them when we have

no rights in this country? Fighting this evil regime must be the first priority of every Indian in this country.' 'Think back, front, right, left, before you decide. ' *Aage, peeche, daayen, baayen, dekh ke bichaar aur faisala karna*. Buta Singh said as he left the meeting. In the end, the meeting decided to boycott.

Buta Singh had made sense, Ram thought and said as much. 'We must bring this illegal regime down,' he told the meeting, 'but everyone should shoulder his share of the burden.' He himself was prepared to sacrifice part of his salary for the cause. 'There should be a national strategy for a national boycott. Everyone should chip in. Traitors should know what will happen to them. We will boycott their shops. 'Burn them down,' someone said. 'Yes, if we have to.' 'Talk is cheap, Master,' Raghu said sharply. 'We need action now.' Then, 'What have you got to lose? Here today, somewhere else tomorrow. Like a bird' *Aaj hiyan, kal huaan. Ek chirai ke rakam*. That was a cruel cut: for Ram, for there was no other place he would rather be, but he did not say anything.

Ram was genuinely distraught to learn next morning that a large part of Buta Singh's cane farm had been burnt down. It was a clear case of arson, punishment for speaking his mind. Ram was amazed at the technique the arsonists had used to avoid being detected. They had tied kerosene-soaked cloth around the tails of a dozen mongoose, lit them and set them lose in the cane field. The terrified mongoose ran for their lives in every which direction, leaving behind a trail of burning tinder-dry cane leaves, making it difficult to put the fires out. The village was split down the middle. Ram thought to himself, 'Here we're fighting for our democratic rights, and this is what we do to a man who had the courage to speak his mind? We must rid ourselves of what we condemn.'

A week or two after Buta Singh's farm was burnt down, a couple of government caterpillar bulldozers arrived to upgrade the village road. That surprised everyone: why their village, why now? Who had approached the government? That evening, all was revealed at the shop. Shafiq Ali, the owner of trucks, had asked the public works minister through a well-connected relative, to see if the badly pot-holed and at places eroded road could be repaired for a little something. What that 'little something' was no one knew, but 'gifts' up to five hundred dollars for these sorts of favours were not rare. No one could do much to Shafiq. They needed his lorry to carry cane. There was no point thinking of ostracizing him: Hindus and Muslims had always kept social interaction to the minimum any way. And Shafiq was more attuned to what leaders of the Fiji Muslim League were saying. 'Keep quiet and work with the Fijians. This is not our fight.'

Ram was saddened at the religious rift. Although Muslims and Hindus in the village were not socially close, relations were still cordial. But ever since a Muslim delegation had told the Great Council of Chiefs that they accepted the coup and would support Fijian aspirations in return for four separate Muslim seats, relations had soured. A local Muslim academic had even said that it was the Hindus who were opposing the Fijians, not Muslims. As far as he was concerned, Muslims and Christians were people of 'The Book,' Hindus were not. His own grandmother had been a Hindu converted to Islam. 'What has religion got to do with the price of *aloo* and *piyaj*?, potatoes and onions, Ram had asked. 'Do these arseholes know the damage they are doing to our people here? These bloody city slickers are lighting a fire they won't be able to put out.'

Once or twice, Ram thought of talking to Shafiq, but saw no point: the damage had been done. And Shafiq had said so many times before, *Jamaat ke baat kaatna haraam haye*. It is a sin to disobey your community. When Shafiq's wife died a few months later, not a single Hindu attended the funeral. Except Ram. But Shafiq did not escape completely unscathed. For a long time, he was mystified why his cane-carrying lorries had so many punctured tyres.The reason, ingenious when you come to think of it, was that people hammered nails into dozens of stalks of cane and scattered them randomly on roads used by the lorries! They lay unnoticed among all the other cane stalks that had fallen from trucks and were being flattened into cane carpets on the cane belt roads.

Shafiq, though, was not the only one who was having second thoughts about joining the resistance. One day, Chinappa Naidu told a meeting at the shop that Fijians were very agitated, in a vengeful mood. '*Maango, maango, nahi maango, jao*.' 'Want, want, don't want, go.' If you want the lease on our terms fine, they were saying, if not, leave. Their demand was clear: One thousand dollar goodwill payment upfront, and no opposition to the coup. '*Fiji hum log ke jamin baitho. Hum hiyan ke raja hai*. Fiji is our land. We are the kings of this place. There was nowhere Chinappa and other evicted tenants could go. Fijians knew our vulnerability, knew our pressure points and they were determined to have their way. '*Vulagi Can't Be Taukei. Sa sega sara*. Immigrants can't be Natives, Never, was the common refrain. It was the same everywhere in Viti Levu, this talk of vengeance and retribution and expulsion. 'Where will I take my family?' he asked simply. Kahan laye jaaib sab ke? He had three children in high school, with a daughter about to be married. The ten

acre plot of leased land was all he had, the sole source of livelihood for the family. Everyone sympathised with Chinappa, because they knew that their turn would come one day, sooner rather than later. What Ram had feared most was taking place right before his eyes, his dream of uniting the village and stiffening its spine was dissolving almost even before it had begun. *So bees with smoke and doves with noisome stench, Are from their hives and houses driven away.*

The worst victims of the coup without doubt were the young people in the village. Those who had passed their exams with good marks — a handful — had gone on to form seven and some even to the university and the local technical institute, but many had failed to make the grade. Their fate was sealed. There were no jobs in the towns, none in the village, no prospect in sight. 'My heart broke,' Ram said to me, 'to see these kids from simple homes, decent, well behaved, wanting to make something of their lives, but with nothing to do, no where to go, victims of blatant racism.' 'Our time was different,' he continued. 'You had a decent education, you got a job. But now, Form Seven is nothing. A university degree is what everyone is looking at.' A lost generation, I thought to myself, promising young lives cut short so early. Ram had found a few of the brighter boys jobs as part-time tutors for the children of business people in town, while some eventually found employment as taxi and bus drivers. That was all he could do. Still, they remembered him with gratitude and affection, like a kind younger uncle, still calling him 'sir' whenever they ran into him. *I would never have thought I would be born here, So late in the stone, so long before morning.*

A few of the girls found employment in one of the tax-free textile factories that had sprung up after the coups.

Thirteen year tax holidays and other concessions had attracted a few foreign companies. The government wanted to kick start the economy by whatever means it could. This seemed an easy and promising option. The government turned a blind eye to the working conditions in the factories. Most women working in them were single mothers from broken homes, widows, young unemployed girls just of school.

One day, Ram received a visit by one of his former students, Kiran. She was working at a garment factory in Lautoka. Ram already had a reputation as a champion of the underdog among the students, the teacher to whom students confided their problems, sought advice, knowing that their confidence would be respected. 'Sir, you must do something about this. How long will these atrocities go on?' *Kuch karana padi,sir, kab tak aise atyachaar chalte rahi*, she said handing him a blue manila folder full of loose handwritten sheets. He promised to read the file that night and get back to her.

What he read in the files enraged him, hand written evidence of example upon example of utter merciless exploitation of women. There was the case of Sheela Kumari, divorced, who worked for a garment manufacturer on probation for six weeks. All she got paid was her bus fares of two dollars, and no pay for the work she had done producing the garments. Then there was Uniasi Marama, in the packing department, who had worked in the factory for 14 years and she still earned only seventy two cents an hour. 'It takes this lady 14 years to earn seventy two cents an hour. She was fourteen years only when she started work,' Kiran said. Meresimani Tinai and Senata Tinai's pay was 50 and 55 cents respectively. Ameila Sukutai did ironing and packing but was paid only 50 cents an hour. 'You can see on this one, sir,' Kiran

said, 'that she is performing two jobs but is being paid only for one.' None of the workers got overtime even though many worked beyond their normal working hours.

Shobna Singh was brave enough to have her experience written down. Ram read the report aloud. 'Work starts on the dot at 8 am. After that, no one is allowed to even look around. The neck stiffens, eyes water and burn and a headache starts, nose gets blocked with cotton dust and back and legs begin to ache. The machines themselves are not in proper working condition yet any delays are blamed on the worker. Hard chairs and poor ventilation add to the discomfort. Few minutes late starting means a deduction in the wage. There is no such thing as sick leave pay. No overtime paid. No benefits for long term service. No insurance to cover any health hazard that may confront a worker while at work. No leave or leave pay. No emergency exits or drills to deal with emergencies. No fire extinguishers in sight. At break, nobody is allowed to leave a second early. Morning break from 10am–10:15: no one is allowed outside the premises. Lunch break is limited to 30 minutes, 12pm–12:30. And at 3 pm there is a 15 minute break where nobody is allowed out again. An hour's break in all that 8 hours of work. No calls are passed on or calls allowed to be made. No one is allowed visitors. In a caged atmosphere workers are urged to work faster and faster.'

Ram asked Kiran to arrange a meeting with one of the workers to get a better feel of the situation. Kiran fetched Anshu. They met at Ram's quarters late on Sunday. Anshu related an incident involving her at the factory the previous day. 'During lunch hour I had gone to the toilet when the alarm bell rang. As soon as I came out, the security guard came and said to me 'What are you doing inside the toilet?' I said,

'Don't you know what a lady does in a toilet.' He said 'Don't talk cheeky, you just go in.' Anshu then went to her desk. As she was punching time off at the end of the day, the security guard came up to her and asked, 'What is in the plastic bag?' I said 'Apples and milk.' The guard grabbed the plastic bag and tore it to look inside. Then he threw the bag and its contents outside the gate. A hard-earned $6.59 cents worth of food destroyed. Then he swore at her. 'Fuck off you bastard, take your plastic and go,' he said, threatening to punch her. Anshu was saved from assault by a Fijian security guard who picked up the apples and milk and put it inside the plastic bag, apologetically.

'You must do something about it, Sir.' Kiran's words kept reverberating in Ram's head. But what? How? Ram began by compiling a list of abuses and transgressions as accurately as he could. With Kiran's assistance, he would meet the garment workers late in the evenings, during weekends, taking care not to be seen in public with his informants. He tracked down Shobna Singh and talked to her at length. Over the next month, Ram compiled a detailed report on the working conditions in the garment factories in the Lautoka area.

Ram then travelled to Suva to give the report to Ema Fulavesi, the trade union activist. Ema was a rolly-polly woman with a passion for her cause. 'This is dynamite, *Bhaiya*, *ek dam julum*' she told him, very good indeed, brother. 'We have the buggers by the balls. *Magai Chinamu*. Sorry, *Bhaiya*, don't mind my language. Big catch, this one! Blerry bastards.' Several months later, Ram received in the mail a small printed paper containing the news of a demonstration in Sydney against the garment industries in Fiji. The demonstration was against the Fijian Garments Exhibit Apparel Expo at Darling Harbour, outside Hall 5, Sydney Exhibition Centre.

It was organised by the Clothing Trades Union, at the request of the Fiji Trade Union Congress. The leaflet announcing the demonstration read: 'The garments being promoted are made in Tax Free Zones by workers earning as little as 50 cents an hour in sweat shop conditions. Many of the companies are Australia and New Zealand employers who have moved part or all of their operations to Fiji to avoid labour laws and trade unions.' A Garment Workers Union has just been registered in Fiji after a long struggle. But workers are still denied a living wage. And some workers caught organising for the Union have been victimised, dismissed, and even physically assaulted.'

The response was swift and effective (though in the long run ineffectual.) The government promised to establish a Garment Training Centre with a factory and a training division, for about 150 to 200 students, with the better students to be retained full-time with full pay to run the company's production factory. The Centre would be run by nominated representatives of the government and the garment industry. Ram was quietly satisfied at the result all the after-school sleuthing had produced. He was even more grateful to Kiran and Shabnam. They had so much to lose, but showed so much courage, more than the kava-sodden, scrotum-scratching men, meeting him at odd hours, providing detailed data on the working conditions, all the while keeping out of the public gaze, seeking no credit or glory for themselves. *Truth is like a torch,* Ram remembered from something he had read along time ago. *The more you shake it, the more it shines.*

The garment industry was furious. How had such damaging 'inside' information gone public? A hunt was on for

a mole in the factory, but no one suspected Kiran. She was always quiet and outwardly obedient and punctual, always calling her boss 'Sir,' averting his gaze, getting along with everyone. But again, it was Jumsa who spilled the beans. He had kept a close eye on where Ram went, who he talked to and reported it to Ram Baran, his uncle. It did not take Ram Baran long to put two and two together.

One day while Ram was teaching his class on 'Literature and Society,' the principal came around and told him that Ram Baran, the chairman of the School Management Committee, wanted to meet him urgently. 'I will complete the class for you,' he said. Judging by the urgency in his voice, Ram knew something was askew. He walked towards the Committee Room with words from an Auden poem ringing in his ears. *The sky is darkening like a stain, Something is going to fall like rain, And it won't be flowers.*

'Masterji, we should talk,' Ram Baran said, beginning the proceedings 'About what?' Ram enquired cautiously. 'Oh, small things, big things, about you and the School.' That all seemed mysterious to Ram. He waited for Ram Baran to continue. 'People have been talking, Master,' he said. Ram looked at him straight in the eye, waiting for him to continue. 'About you and the girl.' 'What girl? What are you talking about?' 'Master, you know the girl, the one who works at the garment factory.' 'You mean Kiran?' 'Yes.' 'What about her? She was my student once and she now works at the garment factory.' 'You two have been seen together at odd hours and strange places. *Jamin ke pas bhi kaan aur ankhi haye*.' Even the land has ears and eyes. 'So?' 'We have the reputation of the school to think of. When married teachers have affairs with their former students, it does not look good, Master.'

Ram was stumped for words. His marriage had been over a long time ago. Geeta was seeing some one else. It was an amicable separation. The two were not meant for each other, they both knew, and always deep in Ram's heart, there was Malti. But Ram had not seen any point in publicising his divorce. His close friends knew but made little of it. Marriage failures were common enough; Ram's was no exception. Ram had not been having affairs, certainly not when there had been so much else to do. To be accused of having an affair with Kiran, attractive though she was, was simply preposterous.

'Kaka [Uncle], let me say this once and once only. I am not having an affair with Kiran or anyone else. Kiran and I have been working on a research project.' He then described the data the two were collecting on the working conditions in the garment factories. 'So it was you, then,' Ram Baran said, 'who gave all that dirt to the trade unions.' 'Kaka,' Ram replied firmly, 'you should see things for yourself. It's worse than what you can imagine.' He went on to talk about women having to get permission to go to the toilet, male guards posted outside women's toilet, the musty, filthy conditions inside, the sexual advances, the threat of violence. 'And to think that this is our own people doing it! Here we are fighting this coup regime, and look at what these bastards are up to. *Kitna gira jaat haye hum log.*' What a low-down people we are. Ram Baran said nothing.

The following week, the Management Board convened. It had been a busy week for Ram Baran. Jason Garments had contributed to the refurbishing of the school library and he was keen to make sure that future funds did not dry up. What better way to ensure that than to ingratiate yourself with the factory owner. Ram Baran told Ravin Dhupelia, the owner,

what Ram had been up to, the damage he had done. 'Get rid of him now, Ram Baran. Now. Get rid of that rotten egg. That arsehole of a bastard.' *Sala, Chutia, Gaandu.* How dare he bite the hand that feeds him?' 'Leave that to me, Boss,' Ram Baran said as he left Duphelia's office. He then contacted all the members of the Management Board, one by one, and told them about Ram and how his immediate firing was necessary for further funding from Jason Garments and other business houses in town.

At the meeting attended by the full Management Board, Ram Baran spoke at length and on behalf of everyone. 'Master, we are not satisfied with your performance. You seem to be more interested in politics than teaching these days.' That was not true, Ram said. He hadn't missed a single day of class. And wasn't it true that the highest number of A Grade passes in Fiji Junior were from his class? Ram Baran ignored him and proceeded with his rehearsed speech, reminding Ram of every thing he had done and said since the coup: organising the village committee, using the school printing machines to circulate newsletters, putting strange ideas about 'dignity and self respect' into the heads of children, and now this: rocking the garment industry. 'You are risking the future of our children. Do you know how many girls from this school the garment factories employ?' Many, Ram knew, but at what cost? 'We don't want to kill the goose that lays the golden egg,' Ram Baran said. Some golden egg, Ram thought to himself. 'We have reached the decision — and it is unanimous, if you must to know — that you should leave the school immediately. *Baat aage tak pahunch gaye haye.* We have already informed the Education Department. *Your tongues are steeped in honey and milk, Your hearts in gall and biting despair.*

'I thought of many things to say,' Ram said to me 'but in the end chose not to. Their minds were already made up. There was no point confusing them with facts. I packed up and left.' Not a single person on the Board spoke up for him, no one in the village came to farewell him. This most idealistic of men with a brave heart and noble vision having to suffer this kind of petty humiliation saddened me immensely. All that selfless work, standing up against the coup, organising people, helping the victims of the garment industry, had in the end come to naught, undone by the duplicity and deviousness of his own people and by his high principles clashing with a rotten world gone strangely awry. *Love, fame, ambition, avarice — 'tis the same, Each idle, all ill, and none the worst — For all are meteors with a different name, And death is the sable smoke where vanishes the flame.*

Ram returned to Suva. His heart had gone out of teaching. He took up a job as a part-time sales representative at a hardware store in Samabula, and spent the rest of his time by himself, reading, alone, in his musty, dingy book-strewn rented flat in Bureta Street, a battered but unbroken man, living in flickering hope. Last night when I visited him, reminiscing as usual about our distant youthful days, he sang a Talat Mehmood song:

> *Phir wahi shaam, wahi gham, wahi tanhaai hai*
> *Dil ko samjhaane teri yaad chali aayi hai*
>
> Once again that evening, that sadness, that anguish.
> Your memories have returned to soothe my heart.

7

In Mr Tom's Country

I seldom visit Tabia now, the village of my birth and childhood. The place is a labyrinth of haunting memories of happier, more innocent times better left untouched. But on the rare occasion I do, I always make an effort to see Arjun Kaka. Now in his late seventies, he is the only one in the village who has a direct connection to my father's generation, the last link to a fading past. He knows my interest in history and we talk endlessly about past events and people at every opportunity. Kaka is illiterate and a vegetarian and teetotaller. Everyone in the village knows him as a man of integrity, a man with a completely unblemished reputation. His wife died about a decade ago and he now lives on the farm with the family of his deceased son. The other three boys, bright and educated, migrated to Australia after the 1987 coup. He misses them desperately, for this is not the way he had wanted to spend his twilight years. He now wished one of them had remained behind. There is no telephone in the house and the letters from his children are rare. He wonders about his grandchildren, how old they are, what they look like, if they remember him, ruminating like old men usually do.

A few years ago, covering a general election, I went to Labasa and visited Kaka. 'Why don't you visit Krishna and the other two boys, Kaka' I said after he had mentioned how badly he missed his children. 'At my age, beta, it is difficult,' he said sadly. 'You know I cannot read and write. Besides, my health is not good.' 'Kaka, so many people like you travel all the time,' I reminded him. 'Look at Balram, Dulare, and Ram Rattan.' Formerly of Tabia, they had moved to town when their cane farm leases were not renewed. Kaka nodded but did not say anything. Then an inspired thought occurred to me. I was returning to Australia a few weeks later and could take Kaka with me. When I made the offer, his face lit up, all the excuses forgotten. They were excuses, really, nothing more. He has a deep yearning to travel but not knowing how. '*Beta, e to bahut julum baat hai*,' he said, this is very good news indeed, son. He embraced me. 'You are like my own son. Bhaiya [my father] would be very proud of you.' If truth be known, since dad's death, I regarded Arjun Kaka as a father.

'Have many people left Labasa in recent years?' I asked Kaka. There was a time when going to Suva was considered 'going overseas,' an experience recounted in glorious and often embroidered detail for years. Australia and New Zealand were out of the question. 'The place is emptying day by day, especially since all the *jhanjhat* [trouble] started.' He meant the coup. 'There is no growth, no hope. Young people, finishing school, leave for Suva. No one returns. There is nothing to return to.' '*Dil uth gaye*,' Kaka said, the heart is no longer here. Kaka's observation reinforced what I had been told in Suva. There was hardly a single Indo-Fijian family in Fiji which did not have at least one member abroad. 'The best and the brightest are leaving,' a friend had remarked in Suva. Only the

chakka panji [hoi poloi] remain.' The wealthy and the well-connected had their families safely 'parked' in Australia and New Zealand, he had said. An interesting way of putting it, I thought, suggesting temporariness, a readiness to move again if the need arose. I had heard a new phrase to describe this new phenomenon: frequent flyer families. Those safely abroad talked of loyalty and commitment to Fiji, of returning one day, but it was just that, talk, nothing more. I felt deeply for people who were trapped and terrorised in Fiji, victims of fate and racial hate.

As the news of Kaka's planned trip to Australia spread, people were genuinely happy for him. At Tali's shop the following evening, Karna bantered. '*Ek memia lete aana, yaar*,' bring a white woman along with you.' '*Kab tak bichari patoh tumhar sewa kari*.' How long will your poor daughter-in-law continue to look after you?' Learn some English words, Mohan advised. 'Thank you, goodbye, hello, how are you, mate.' He was the village bush lawyer. 'Make sure you are all 'suit-boot,' [well dressed], not like this,' referring to Kaka's khaki shorts and fading floral shirt. 'We don't want others to know that we are country bumpkins.' 'Which we are,' Haria interjected to mild mirth. Bhima wondered whether some of the *kulambars* [CSR overseers] were still alive and whether Arjun Kaka might be able to meet some of them in Australia. Mr Tom, Mr Oxley, Mr Johnson.

Mr Tom: now there was a name from ancient history. He was the first white man I ever saw. Tall, pencil-thin, white hard hat, his face like a red tomato in the midday sun, short sleeve shirt and trousers, socks pulled up to the knees, the shirt pocket bulging with pens and a well thumbed note book. The overseers had a bad reputation as heartless men driven to

extract the maximum from those under their charge. Was that true, I wondered. 'Well the Company was our *mai-bap*,' Kaka said, our parents. 'You did what you were told.' Bhima chimed in: 'The *Kulambars* were strict but fair.' So it wasn't all that bad? I wanted to know more. Bhima continued. 'As far as they were concerned, we were all the same, children of coolies. They didn't play favourites among the farmers. Look at what is happening now.' I had no idea. 'Look at all the *ghoos-khori* [corruption]' He went to explain how palms had to be greased at every turn — to get enough trucks to cart cane to the mills, to get your proper turn to harvest. 'In the old days, if you did your work, you were left alone.' Nostalgia for a simpler, less complicated time perhaps, I wondered, but said nothing.

People in the village had very sharp memories of the overseers. Mr Tom drank kava 'like fish,' Mohan remembered. 'And chillies,' Karna added, 'A dozen of those '*rocketes*,' no problem. '*Chini-pani, chuttar pani.*' We all exploded with laugher. *Chini-pani* in the cane belt meant 'sugar has turned to water,' the sugar content is down, which is what allegedly the overseers at the mill weighbridge told the farmers, cheating them of a fair income. *Chuttar pani* refers to washing your bum with water after going to the toilet, a reference in this case to Mr Tom's probably agonizing toilet sessions after eating so many hot chillies.

Overseers, I learnt, were expected to have some rudimentary Hindi because the farmers had no English. But sometimes their pronunciation of Hindi words left people rolling with laughter. Bhima recalled Mr Oxley once asking someone's address. '*Uske ghar kahan hai.*' Where is his house? But the way he pronounced '*ghar*' — gaar — it sounded like the Hindi word for arse: 'Where is his arse!' Kaka recalled Mr

Tom visiting Nanka's house one day wanting to talk to him. But Nanka had gone to town. Mr Tom asked Nanka's son whether he could speak to his mother. Instead of saying '*Tumar mai kahan baitho*,' where is your mother (*mai*), he accidentally added the swear word, *chod*, to fuck: a common swear word among overseers, '*Tumar mai-chod kahan baitho*,' where is your mother fucker! Which left Mrs Nanka tittering, covering her mouth with *orhni*, (shawl), and scuttling towards the kitchen. Mr Tom practically sprinted to his landrover as soon as he realised the faux pas he had just committed, his face flushed and covered in sweat.

This warm reminiscence of aging men from another era brought back memories which until now had vanished. I recalled the excitement of the visit every three months or so of the CSR Mobile Unit coming to the village. On the designated evening, the entire village would gather in the school compound, sit on sheets of stitched sacks (*paal*), cover themselves with blankets in the colder months and watch a tiny screen with grainy pictures perched at the end of a land rover. At the outer edges of the compound would be placed a put-put-put droning generator to provide power to the projector. Sometimes, the documentary would be about a model Indian family, sometimes about some aspect of the sugar industry or good husbandry. 'This is Ram Prasad's family,' the voice-over would announce in beautifully cadenced English. Then we would see an overseer, in hard white hat, his hands on his hips, talking to Ram Prasad, in short sleeves and khaki pants, his amply-oiled hair neatly combed back, his hands by his side or behind his back, not saying much, avoiding eye contact with the overseer. Ram Prasad's wife would be at a discreet distance by the kitchen, wearing

lehenga and blouse, her slightly bowed head covered with orhni, while school children, in neat uniforms with their bags slung around their shoulders, walked past purposefully. The moral was not lost on us. We too could be like Ram Prasad's family, happy and prosperous if only we were as dutiful, hard working and respectful of authority as them.

Occasionally we would see documentaries about Australia. We did not understand the language, partly because of the rapid speed at which it was spoken, but the pictures remain with me: of vast fields of golden-brown wheat harvested by monster machines, hat-wearing men on horseback mustering cattle in rough hilly country, wharves lined with huge container carriers, buildings tall beyond our imagination and streets choked with cars crawling ant-like. Pictures of parched, desolate land full of rock and rubble, dry river beds and ghost gums puzzled me. It seemed so harsh to us surrounded by nothing but lush tropical green. I sometimes wondered how white people, who seemed so delicate to us, could live in a place like that. But the overwhelming impression remained of a vast and rich country. It was from there that all the good things we liked came: white purified sugar we used in our pujas, the bottled jam, the Holden cars. The thought that we would one day actually live there was too outrageous to contemplate. And we did not.

I also remembered the annual school essay competition. The CSR would send the topics to the school early in the year. Usually, they were topics such as 'Write an Essay on the Contribution the CSR Makes to Fiji,' or 'How the Sugar Industry Works.' The brighter pupils in the school were expected to participate and turn in neatly written and suitably syrupy pieces. I was a regular contributor. One day during the

morning assembly, our head teacher, Mr Subramani Gounden, announced that I had done the school proud by winning the *third* prize in the whole of Vanua Levu! The first one ever from our school, and the only one for several years, I was later told. I vividly recall trooping up to the front to receive my certificate scrawled with a signature at the bottom. Such a success, such thrill. It was at university that I realised how unrelenting and tough-minded the CSR was in the management of the sugar industry, but at primary school, we were immensely grateful for the tender mercies that came our way. We were so proud that on the prize giving day, we had an overseer, no less, as our guest of honour. Mr Tom was a regular and much honoured presence.

One day I asked Arjun Kaka what he thought Australia would be like. '*Nahin Jaanit, beta.*' I don't know. 'There must be a lot of people like us there,' he said. 'Why do you say that?' I asked somewhat perplexed. 'You know white people. They can't plant and harvest sugar cane, build roads or do any other hard physical work like that. All that is our job. They rule, we toil.' Kaka spoke from experience, but I assured him that white people did indeed do all the hard work in Australia. They planted and harvested cane and wheat, worked as janitors and menial labourers, drove trucks, buses and cars. Kaka remained unconvinced. 'It must be cold there?' he enquired. I tried my best to explain the seasons in Australia. Knowing the Canberra weather in summer, I said 'Sometimes it gets hotter than Fiji. 'But how come then white people there don't have black skins? Look at us: half a day in the sun and we become black like baigan [eggplants].' 'You will see it all for yourself, Kaka,' I said and left it at that. This old man is in for the shock of his life, I thought to myself. His innocence and simplicity, his complete

lack of understanding of the outside world was endearing in a strange kind of a way. I made a mental note of things I would have to do in the next few weeks: get Kaka's passport and visa papers ready, ask Krishna in Sydney to purchase the ticket. Then I left for Suva, promising to inform Kaka of the date of travel well in time. I would see him in Nadi.

Kaka was relieved to see me again in Nadi. This was his first visit to Viti Levu, the first out of Labasa actually. In the late 1990s, the Nadi International Airport resembled a curious atmosphere of a mixture of a marriage celebration and a funeral procession as people arrived in the busloads to welcome or farewell friends and family. Men were dressed in multi-coloured floral shirts and women in gaudy lehengas and salwar kamiz and saris. I noticed a family huddled in one corner of the airport lounge. One of them was leaving. I could quite imagine the scene at their home the previous night. A goat would have been slaughtered and close family and friends invited to a party long into the night. The puffed red eyes tell the story of a sleepless night. A middle-aged woman, presumably the mother, prematurely aged, with streaks of grey dishevelled hair, was crying, a white hanker chief covering her mouth. And the father, looking anxious, sad and tearful, chatted quietly with fellow villagers, passing time.

This was a regular occurrence in those days: ordinary people, sons and daughters of the soil, with uncertain futures, leaving for foreign lands. A trickle is turning into a torrent right before our eyes. To an historian, the irony was inescapable. A hundred years ago, our forbears had arrived in Fiji, ordinary folk from rural India, shouldering their little bundles and leaving for some place they had not heard of before but keen to make a new start. A hundred years later,

there were children and grandchildren on the move again: the same insecurity, the same anxiety about their fate. No one seemed to care that so many of Fiji's best and brightest were leaving. Some Fijian nationalists actually want the country emptied of Indians. Kaka noticed my contemplative silence. He had read my thoughts. He asked, '*Beta, desh ke ka hoi?*' What will happen to this land? It was an interesting and revealing formulation of the problem. He hadn't said '*hum log*' a communal reference to the Indo-Fijians. He had placed the nation — desh — before the community. I wished Fijians who were applauding the departure of Indians could see the transparent love an unlettered man like Kaka had for the country.

Arjun Kaka seemed nervous as we entered the plane: this was only the second time he had ever flown in a plane. The first time was when he flew from Labasa to Nadi to catch the flight to Sydney. Kaka was watchful, nervous. 'So many seats, beta,' he said. '*Jaise chota saakis ghar*,' like a mini theatre. Not a bad description, I thought to myself. 'And so many people! Will the plane be able to take off?' I watched him say a silent prayer as the plane began to taxi. 'Everything will be fine, Kaka,' I reassured him. 'Yes, beta, I just wanted to offer a prayer,' he said smiling. Sensing my curiosity, he said, 'Oh, I was just saying to God that I have come up this high, please don't take me any higher just yet.' We both smiled at the thought.

Half an hour after take off, the drinks trolley came. I asked for a glass of white. Knowing that he was teetotaller, I asked Kaka if he would like anything soft. 'No, Beta, I am okay. *Sab theek hai.*''Nothing?' 'What about soft drinks: tomato or orange juice, water?' 'At my age, you have to be careful,' Kaka said to me some minutes after the trolley had gone. 'I have to go to the toilet after I have a drink. Can't contain it

for too long.' '*Bahut jor pisaap lage*. 'But there is a toilet on the plane, Kaka,' I reassured him, gently touching his forearm. 'Actually there are several, both at the front and back of the plane.' That caught Kaka by complete surprise. A toilet on the plane? 'You can do the other business there, too, if you want,' I continued. But Kaka was unwilling to take the risk. Later I realised a possible reason for his hesitation: if he did the other business, he couldn't wash himself with water — toilet paper he had never used.

When lunch was served, Kaka refused once again. He was a strict vegetarian, a *sadhu* to boot. 'You can have some bread and fruit, Kaka,' I said. He still refused. 'You don't know what the Chinese put in the bread,' he said. In Labasa, all the bread was made by Chinese and a rumour was started, probably by an Indo-Fijian rival, that they used lard in the dough. I did not know but it did not matter to me. In the end, Kaka settled for an '*apul*' and a small bunch of grapes. 'I am sorry, Kaka, but I have ordered chicken,' I said apologetically. '*Koi bat nahin*,' he said, don't worry. Everyone in his family ate meat, including his wife. He was its only vegetarian.

My curiosity was aroused. How did Kaka become a vegetarian and a teetotaller? Most people in the village were not. I noticed that the palm of his right hand was deformed, his skin burnt and his fingers crooked. 'Kaka,' I said, 'if you don't mind my asking, how did that happen?' 'It is a long story, Beta,' he said. 'But we have three hours to kill,' I replied. This is what Kaka told me. Soon after he got married, he had a large itchy sore on the back of his right palm. Someone had obviously 'done' something. Magic and witchcraft, *jadu tona*, were an integral part of village life. One possibility, he said, was his neighbour, Ram Sundar, who might have spread the rumour

that Kaka had leprosy, the most dreaded social disease one could imagine, a disease with a bad omen. If Kaka went to Makogai Hospital (for lepers, in the remote Lomaiviti group), the whole family would be ostracised, no one would think of marrying into it, no invitations to marriages and festive occasions. Social pressure would force the family to move to some other place to start afresh, as far away from established settlement as possible. If Kaka had leprosy, he would have to move from the village and Ram Sundar would then finally realise his dream of grabbing Kaka's ten acre farm. Such cunning, such heartlessness, and here was the outside world thinking that warm neighbourly relations characterised village life.

The extended family — because their reputation would be singed too by this tragedy — decided that something had to be done soon about Kaka's condition. Rumour was spreading fast. Instead of going to a doctor — no one in the village did or really believed in the efficacy of western medicine — his *girmitya* [indentured] father sent him to an *ojha*, a sorcerer, in Wainikoro some thirty or so miles away to the north. The *ojha*, Ramka, was famous — or dreaded — throughout Vanua Levu. He had once saved the life of a man, Ram Bharos, who had gone wild, squealing like a mouse sometimes and roaring like a lion at others, clenching his teeth and hissing through closed lips, because he had faltered trying to master magic rituals which would enable him to destroy people and cattle and property, even control the elements. To acquire that power, Ram Bharos was told — by whom it was not known — that he would have to eat a human heart sharp at midnight. Nothing was going to deter Ram Bharos from realising his ambition. He killed his own aged father. At night, he went to the graveyard, opened his father's chest with a knife and put the heart on

a banana leaf. After burying the body, he walked to a nearby river, with the heart in his hands, and waded chest-deep into the river. Then something frightening happened. He saw a man shrouded in white walking towards him. Suddenly there was a blinding flash of light. Ram Bharos stumbled, forgot the names of deities he was supposed to invoke. He went mad. Ramka cured him partly, restoring a semblance of normalcy to Ram Bharos' damaged personality. This sounds like an improbable story, but I believed Kaka. Labasa, dubbed the Friendly North, has its dark side as its residents know only too well.

It was to this famous Ojha that they had taken Arjun Kaka. In a dimly lit room, Ramka did his magic. He rubbed Kaka's damaged palm with fat and turned it over the over the fire for a very long time, chanting words in a language that was incomprehensible to him. By the time he had finished, the skin had been charred. A few days later, the bones had twisted. But Kaka was 'cured,' he did not have leprosy, the family's honour was saved, and the farm remained intact. Ramka asked Kaka never to touch meat and not have pork cooked at his home. That was how Kaka had become a vegetarian.

Magic, witchcraft, sorcery, belief in the supernatural, the fear of ghosts and devils, blind faith in healers and magic men: it all recalled for me a world which the *girmitiyas* had brought with them and of which we all were a part, but which now belonged to an era long forgotten, for the present generation nothing more than stories from a twisted imagination. And this man, from that world, was going to Australia! 'I have forgotten the details, Beta,' Arjun Kaka apologised. 'You are the first person to ask me.' I am glad I did. After Kaka had spoken, I recalled the pin-drop silence of eerie unlit nights, in the thatched bure — *belo* — where we slept, the scrotum-

shrivelling fear of strange nocturnal animals scurrying on dry leaves around the house, stories of swaying lights in the neighbouring hills, soft knocks on doors at odd hours, the mysterious aroma at night of perfumes usually sprinkled on corpses, streaking stars prophesising death somewhere, wailing noises across the paddy fields and shimmering figures in the mangrove swamps. We dreaded nights.

At Sydney airport, Krishna met us. I gave him my phone number and promised to keep in touch. Kaka had a three month visa and I told him that I would visit him in Sydney. After we embraced, I headed for Canberra, determined that I would do everything I could to give Kaka a memorable journey to Mr Tom's country. About a month later, Krishna phoned me. Kaka wanted to talk to me. 'Beta, I am going back soon. I would like to see you before I return.' 'But you have a full three month visa.' 'Something inside tells me that I must return as soon as possible.' A premonition of some sort? His world of magic and sorcery came to mind, and I realised there was no point arguing or trying to persuade him to change his mind. I left for Sydney the following day.

Krishna and his wife had gone to work and the children were at school when I reached the house. It was immediately clear to me that Kaka was a lost man, uncomfortable and anxious. I reminded him of his promise to tell me the full story about his Australian experience. '*Poora jad pulai.*' Everything. What he missed most, Kaka said, was his daily routine. In Tabia, he would be up at the crack of dawn, feed the cattle and have an early breakfast before heading off to the fields. Even at his age. In the evening, after an early shower at the well, he would light the wick lamp — *dhibri* — and do his *puja*. He missed his devotional songs on the radio, the death notices in

the evening. He would not be able forgive himself if someone dear to him died while he was away. Kaka often wondered how Lali, his beloved cow, was. He treated her tenderly, almost like a human, a member of the family. For him not looking after animals, especially cows (*gau-mata*, mother) was a crime.

In Fiji, Kaka was connected, was part of a living community. He had a place in the wider scheme of things. But not here. 'I sit here in the lounge most of the day like a deaf and blind man. There is television and radio, but they are of no use to me.' What about walk in the park, a stroll in the nearby supermarket? I asked. Kaka recalled (for him) a particularly hair-raising experience. One day Krishna had left him in the mall of a large supermarket and had gone to get his car repaired. At first Kaka was calm, but as time passed, surrounded by so many white people, he panicked. What if something happened to Krishna? He did not have the home address or the telephone number with him. How would he find his way home? He tried to talk to a young Indian man — who was probably from Fiji — but man kept walking, muttering to himself. 'He probably thought I was a beggar or something.' From that day on, Kaka preferred to remain at home. For a man fond of the outdoors, active in the field, this must have been painful. 'It is torture, beta. Sitting, eating, pissing, farting. That's all I do all day, everyday.' I felt his distress.

Did Krishna and his wife treat him well, I wanted to know. It was an intrusive question, I know, but I wanted to be helpful. 'Oh, they both are very nice. *Patoh* makes vegetarian dishes and leaves them in the fridge for me. I have a room to myself. My clothes are washed. On the weekends, they take me out for drives.' But there was something missing, I felt. 'Beta, it is not their fault but I don't see much of them. Babu

[Krishna] goes to work in the morning and *patoh* does the evening shift. By the time she returns, it is time for bed.' The 'ant-like life,' as Kaka aptly put it, was not his cup of tea. 'Getting established in this society is not easy Kaka,' I said. 'But things improve with time.' 'That's true, but by then, half your life is over. These people would have been millionaires in Fiji if they worked as hard as they do here.' 'They do it for the future of their children, Kaka.' He nodded. 'I know, I know.'

Kaka felt acutely conscious of himself whenever he did anything, constantly on the guard. Back home, he would clear his throat loudly and cough out the phlegm on the lawn. Everyone did it. Here his grandchildren giggled and covered their mouths with their hands in embarrassment. In Tabia, Kaka always wore shorts at home. Here, on several occasions, he felt undressed, half naked, when Krishna's friends came around. 'I could see that both Babu and Patoh were sometimes uncomfortable.' Sometimes, the people he met at pujas and other ceremonies, especially people from Viti Levu, laughed in jest at his rustic Labasa Hindi. 'They find us and our language backward. '*Tum log ke julum bhasa, Kaka*,' they would say to me mockingly, uncle, you folk (from Labasa) have a wonderful language: '*awa-gawa*, [come and gone, when they say *aya-gaya*], *dabe* [flood, *baadh*], *bakeda* [crab, *kekda*]. They find it funny, but after a while I find the mocking hurtful. So I don't say much, not that I have much to say these people anyway.' In Tabia, Kaka had his own *kakkus* (outhouse) where he could wash himself properly with water after toilet, but here he would sometimes spill water on the toilet floor or accidentally leak on it, causing mustiness and foul smell. He would then feel guilty and embarrassed. Kaka found the accumulation of small things like this making him self conscious, ill-at-ease in

the house. No one ever said anything, but he felt that he was a bit of a nuisance for everybody, especially when Krishna's friends came around.

Kaka was desperate for news from home, any news. There was nothing about Fiji, let alone Labasa, on television and only brief snippets on one or two radio stations, which he invariably missed because he did not know how to use the dial. 'At home, I knew what was happening in Fiji and the world, but here I sit like a frog in a well. It is as if we do not exist.' I understood his puzzlement. Fiji — Labasa — was all he knew. His centre of the universe was of no interest and of no consequence to the rest of the world. 'That is the way of the world, Kaka,' I tried to assure him. 'We are noticed only when we make a mess of things, or when there is a natural disaster or when some Australian tourist gets raped or robbed.' Some of the people he had met, especially the older ones, hankered for news from home, but the younger ones were too preoccupied with life and work to bother.

Television both entertained and embarrassed Kaka. He couldn't watch the soapies with the entire family in the room. The scantily clad women, the open display of skin, the kissing, the suggestive bedroom scenes, the crude advertising (for lingerie, skin lotions) had him averting his eyes or uttering muffled coughs. Sometimes, unable to bear the embarrassment, he would just retire to his room on the pretence that he was tired, and then spend much of the night sleepless, wondering about everything. He liked two shows, though, and enjoyed them like a child. One was David Attenborough's natural life programs. He did not understand the language but the antics of the animals and creatures of the sea did not need words to enjoy. These programs brought a whole world alive for him.

He remembered the animals his girmitiya father used to talk about: *sher* (lion), *bhaloo* (bear), *hathi* (elephant), *bandar* (monkey). He had seen pictures of them in books, but to see live animals on the screen was magical. And he liked cartoons, especially the Bug's Bunny shows. They made no sense to him at all — nor to me — but that was their charm, characters skittering across the screen speaking rapid-fire '*gitbit gitbit*.' He would laugh out aloud when no one was watching.

These were the only programs Kaka could watch with his small grandchildren. Otherwise there was no communication between them. The children were nice: '*sundar*' is how Kaka described them. They made tea for him and offered him biscuit and cookies, but they had no Hindi at all and Kaka knew no English. He would caress their heads gently and hug them and they would occasionally take him for walks in the park nearby, but no words were exchanged. '*Dil roye, beta*' Kaka said to me, the heart cries, 'that I cannot talk to my own flesh and blood in the only language I know.' 'I hope they will remember me and remember our history.' Krishna was making an effort to introduce his children to Indian religion and culture through the weekend classes held at the local *mandir*, but it was probably a lost cause. History was not taught in many public schools, certainly not Pacific or Fijian history and I wondered how the new generation growing up in Australia, exposed to all the challenges posed by global travel and technology, would learn about their past. I did not have the heart to tell Kaka, but I know that his world would go with him, just as mine will, too. Our past will be more than a foreign country to children growing up in Australia.

Once or twice, I took Kaka out for a ride through the heart of Sydney, pointing out the monuments, Hyde Park,

Circular Quay, the Museum and the Mitchell Library, but Kaka had no understanding and no use for the icons of Australian culture. For him, the city was nothing more than concrete and glass chaos, one damn tall building after another. I took him for a ride in the country, playing devotional Hindi music in the car (which he enjoyed immensly). Kaka had imagined Australia to be clogged with buildings and people, but the long, unending distances between towns both fascinated and terrified him. In Labasa an hour's journey was considered long; the idea of driving for a couple of days to get from one place to another was alien to him. And the geography too fascinated Kaka: the dry barren countryside wheat-brown in December, the bleached bones of dead animals by the roadside, the rusting hulks of discarded machinery and farms stretching for thousands of hectares. 'How can one family manage all this by themselves,' he wondered. 'How can you grow anything in this type of soil?' And he wondered how, living so far apart on their farms, the people kept the community intact. I said little: he was wondering aloud, talking to himself. On our return journey, Kaka said sadly that he wished my Kaki [his wife] could have seen all this with him. I wished that too. I could sense that he was missing her. Kaka remained silent for a long time.

I was still unsatisfied that Kaka was happy with all that Krishna and I between us had been able to show him. Then it came to me that Kaka might like to visit the Taronga Zoo. It was an inspired thought. Kaka was like a child in a garden of delight. The animals he had seen on the television screen he saw live with his own eyes: giraffe, rhino, tiger, leopard, lion, cobra, and elephant. I was so glad that he was enjoying himself, pointing out animals to me, saying: 'look, look,' with

all the excitement of an innocent child. As we approached the monkey section of the zoo, Kaka stopped, joined his palms in prayer and said *Jai Hanuman Ji Ki*, Hail to Lord Hanuman, the monkey god, Lord Rama's brave and loyal general, who had single-handedly rescued Sita from Ravana's clutches. He was excited to see a cobra. 'Nag Baba,' he said reverentially, the snake god. When I looked at him, Kaka smiled but I couldn't tell whether his display of quiet reverence for the monkeys and cobras was for real or was it for my entertainment! I knew that the old man certainly had an impish sense of humour.

As we were having a cup of tea at the end of the zoo visit, sweetening it with white sugar, Kaka wondered where that was manufactured. The next day, I took Kaka to the CSR refinery. He was thrilled. We considered white sugar 'pure,' enough to offer it to the gods in our *pujas* and *havans*. A supervisor gave us a good informative tour when he found out that Kaka was from Fiji. Kaka was impressed with how clean the place was and how new the machinery was, nothing remotely like the filthy, stench-ridden sugar mills in Fiji. We also visited an IXL jam factory on the way. Jam and bread were a luxury for many poor families in rural areas of Labasa, to be enjoyed on special occasions, such as birthdays. The standard food in most homes was curry, rice and roti, with all the vegetables coming from the farm itself.

The visit to the sugar refining factory re-kindled Kaka's interest in the CSR. He wondered whether any of the *kulmbars* were still alive. 'We could find out,' I offered. It would mean a lot of research, but I wanted to do it for this man who meant so much to me. I rang the CSR head office in Sydney. There was nothing on the overseers. Evidently, once they finished with the Company, they disappeared off the

record books, a bit like the girmitiyas about whom everything was documented when they were under indenture, and nothing, or very little, when they became free. Was there ever an association or club of former Fiji overseers, I wondered. The lady did not know but promised to find out. She rang an hour or two later to say that I could try Mr Syd Snowsill. He was the leader of the Fiji pack in Sydney. The name seemed vaguely familiar; he was, from memory, the spearhead of the Seaqaqa Cane Expansion project in the early 1970s. A gruff voice greeted me when I rang him. When I explained the purpose of my enquiry, he became relaxed. '*Bahut Accha*,' very good. 'Who are you after? Anyone in particular?' I volunteered three names: Mr Tom, Mr Oxley and Mr Johnson. 'I see,' Mr Snowsill said chuckling and with some affection, 'all the Labasa *badmaash* gang, eh,' the Labasa hooligans. He did not know the whereabouts of Mr Oxley and Mr Johnson, but Mr Tom — Leslie Duncan Thompson — was living in retirement in Ballina. 'His name will be in the local telephone book,' Mr Snowsill said as he wished me good luck. '*Shukriya ji. Namaste or should I say Khuda Hafiz!*' 'Both are fine.'

If you do not know it, Ballina (Bullenah in the local Aboriginal language) is one of the loveliest places in Australia. A rural sugar cane growing community of fewer than twenty thousand in sub-tropical northern New South Wales, by the enchanting bottle-green Richmond River and surrounded by sea of rippling cane fields for as far as the eye can see, tidal lagoons and surf beaches nearby. It was the kind of place I knew that Kaka would like: a rural cane country since the 1860s, the people, friendly and genuine, in the way country folk generally are. And he did, as we drove on the Princess Highway through small, picaresque seaside towns,

beaches, thickly-wooded rolling hills along the roadside, across a gently gathering greenness in the distance.

Mr Tom was certainly in the phone book when I checked the next morning. His address was a retirement home on the outskirts of the town, on a small hill overlooking the river. I didn't ring but drove to the place to give Mr Tom a surprise. My mental picture of him remained of a tall thin man, barking orders. Kaka was smiling in anticipation, perspiring slightly. We waited in the wick chairs in the veranda as the lady at the front desk went to get him from the dining table across the room. As he walked towards us, I knew it was Mr Tom: tall, erect, with a bigger waist now, face creased and the hair gone, but not the sense of purposefulness. 'Yeash,' he drawled. When I explained why we had come and told him Kaka's name, he beamed and hugged him, two old codgers meeting after decades, slapping each other gently on the back. '*Salaam, sahib*,' Kaka muttered. '*Salaam, salaam*,' Mr Tom replied excitedly. '*Chai lao. Jaldi, jaldi*,' bring some tea, quick-fast, he said to no one in particular. Perhaps he wanted us to know that he still had Hindustani after all these years. '*Tum kaise baitho*,' Mr Tom asked, Kaka, how are you?

Before Kaka could reply, Mr Tom said, '*Hum to buddha hai ab*,' I am an old man now. I translated for Kaka. After a while, the names came to Mr Tom: Lalta, Nanka, Sundar (he pronounced it Soonda). He especially asked after Udho, the de facto head man of the village, who was one of the few from Labasa to volunteer for the Labour Corps during World War Two. He had died some years back. 'Too bad,' Mr Tom said. 'He was a good man.' He asked after Kaka's family, about the school. 'I haven't been to Labasa since leaving, but hear it is a modern place now, not bush place like it used to be. They

tell me the roads have been tarsealed and people have piped water. No longer a *pukka jungali* place, eh. You people deserve every bit of it.'

'*Seaqaqa kaise baitho*, Arjun? How is Seaqaqa? Mr Tom asked Kaka. That was the project on which he had worked with Mr Snowsill. It had been launched with great hope of getting Fijians into the sugar industry. Half the leases were reserved for them. When Kaka told him that many Fijians had left their farms or sub-leased them to Indo-Fijian tenants, Mr Tom seemed genuinely sad to learn that all the effort that he and other overseers had put in had gone to pot. 'It was done all too suddenly. They wanted to make political mileage out of it. Win elections. All that *tamasha* (sideshow). That's no way to run this business. We needed to have proper training for them, proper husbandry practices in place. You can't just pluck them out the bush and make them successful farmers overnight. Ridiculous.' 'Farming is a profession, son,' Mr Tom said to me, 'just like any other. It is not everyone's cup of tea.' Mr Tom said that the CSR should have remained in Fiji for another five to ten years to effect a good transition, train staff properly, and mostly to get politicians to see the problems of the industry from a business angle. 'But no, everything had to be done in a rush. You got your independence and you didn't want white men around telling you what to do anymore. Fair enough, I suppose.'

Then Mr Tom asked about the current situation. He had read that the industry was in dire straits. 'I am afraid it is true, Mr Tom,' I said. Most leases in Daku, Naleba, Wainikoro, Laga Laga — places Mr Tom knew so well — had not been renewed, and the former farms were slowly reverting to bush. Mr Tom shook his head. 'Sad. So much promise, shot through

so early.' He asked about the farmers. Those evicted were moving out, many to Viti Levu, starting afresh as market gardeners, vegetable growers, general labourers and domestic hands. 'Girmit again, eh? Unnecessary tragedy. Why? What for? We have all gone mad.'

I asked Mr Tom about something that had been on my mind for many years. 'Why didn't the CSR sell its freehold land to the growers when it decided to leave Fiji? It would have been the right thing to do, the humane thing to do.' Mr Tom acknowledged my question with that characteristic drawl of his, 'Yeash.' And then bluntly, 'We couldn't give a rat's arse about who bought the land. All we wanted was *nagad paisa* [cash].' Fijian leaders understood very well that land was power and didn't want the CSR to sell its freehold land to Indians. Over two hundred thousand bloody acres or so. Indian leaders in the Alliance went along, trying to please their masters, hoping for some concessions elsewhere. The Fijians and the Europeans — Mara, Penaia, Falvey, Kermode, that crowd — had them by the balls. We in the Company watched all this in utter incomprehension and disbelief, but it wasn't our show. We were so pissed off with the Dening Award.' He was referring to the award by Lord Denning, Britain's Master of the Roll, which favoured the growers against the millers and which led eventually to CSR's departure from Fiji in 1973. 'And then there was the Gujarati factor, did you know?' I didn't. 'Some of your leaders feared that if Indian tenants got freehold land, Gujarati merchants would get their hands on them by hook or crook. To some, the Gujaratis were a bigger menace than Fijians and Europeans. Such bloody short-sightedness. Son, some of your suffering is self-inflicted. Harsh thing to say, but true.'

After a spell of silence, Kaka wanted to know about Mr Tom's life after Tua Tua. From Tua Tua he had gone to Lomowai and did the rounds of several Sigatoka sectors (Kavanagasau, Olosara, Cuvu) before moving to Lautoka mill as a supervisor. Taking early retirement, he returned to Australia and after some years of working in Ballina's sugar industry, he 'went fishing,' as he put it, travelling, taking up golf and lawn bowling. I vividly recalled lawn bowling as the game white people, in white uniforms and white shoes played at Batanikama. Wife and children? Kaka wanted to know. The wife had died a few years back, which is when he moved to this place. The children were living in Queensland. 'There is nothing for them here.' Kaka wondered if Mr Tom still had that fearsome taste for hot chillies. '*Nahin sako*, Arjun,' can't do it anymore. '*Pet khalas*', the stomach's gone. 'And what do you do, young man?' Mr Tom asked me. When I told him that I was an academic in Canberra, he smiled. '*Shabaash*, beta,' well done, son. 'Boy from Labasa, eh! Who would have thought! From the cane fields of Fiji to the capital of Australia! And you joined the bloody know-all academics at the tax payers expense! Good onya, son.'

We had been talking like this for an hour or so when the topic of the coups in Fiji came up. Mr Tom had been outraged by what had taken place. There was broad sympathy in conservative Australia for the coups, who saw them as the desperate struggle of the indigenous community against the attempted dominance of an immigrant one. But Mr Tom was different. 'I wrote letters to the local papers, gave a few talks and interviews on the radio. No bloody use. Look, I said, you don't know the Indian people. I do. I have worked with them. I understand them. They made Fiji what it is today. They have

been the backbone of the sugar industry. You take them out and the whole place will fall apart. Just like that. What wrong have they done? How have they wronged the Fijian people? Their only vices are thrift and industry.' He went on like this for sometime. I was not used to hearing this kind of assessment from people in Australia. Mr. Tom was refreshingly adamant, defiant.

'Yours must have been a voice in the wilderness, Mr Tom,' I said 'Bloody oath, yes. You talk about immigrant people ripping natives apart. Bloody well look at Australia! Look what we have done to the Aborigines. Snatched their land, made them destitute, pushed them into the bush, robbed them of their rights. Bloody genocide, if you ask me. What have the Indians done to Fiji? They worked hard on the plantations so that the Fijians could survive. What's bad about that? If I had my way, I would bring the whole bang lot here. We need hardworking people like you in this country.' Mr Tom had spoken from the heart. 'Let me not go on, because all this hypocrisy lights me up.' 'Mr Howard would not approve,' I said. 'What would these city slickers know,' Mr Tom said dismissively. 'They don't know their arse from the hole in the ground, if you ask me.' I had heard many a colourful Australian slang — blunt as a pig's arse, cold as a witch's tits, all over the place like a mad woman's shit, slipperier than snot on a brass doorknob — but this one was unfamiliar. I smiled, and appreciated Mr Tom's unvarnished directness.

It was time to go. Once again, Kaka and Mr Tom hugged. 'Well Arjun, *nahi jaano phir milo ki nahin milo*,' don't know if we will ever meet again. 'Look after yourself and say salaam to the old timers.' With that we headed back to Sydney. I told Kaka all what Mr Tom had said. 'Remember beta what I told you: many kulambars were tough but fair. We were not completely

innocent either: *Chori, Chandali, Chaplusi,*' thievery, stupidity, wanton behaviour. I was impressed, even touched, by Mr Tom's directness and his principled uncompromising stand on the Fiji coups. I had not expected this sort of humanity in a former kulambar, whose general reputation in Fiji is still rotten. Talking to Mr Tom and driving through the cane country brought back memories of growing up in Tabia more than a half century ago — of swollen brown rivers, the smell of pungent cane fires reddening the ground, cane-carting trains snaking through the countryside, little thatched huts and corrugated iron houses scattered around the dispersed settlements, smoke from cooking fires rising in the distance, little school children in neat uniforms walking Indian-file to school. 'You are a godsend,' Kaka had said to me when I had offered to bring him to Australia with me. In truth, Kaka was a godsend for me. With him, I had revisited a world of which I was once a part but no longer am.

I dropped Kaka at Krishna's place and returned to Canberra. I was going to Suva for a conference in a couple of months' time and promised to see him then. Tears were rolling down his stubbled cheek as he hugged me. '*Pata nahin beta ab kab miliho*,' don't know son when we will meet again. I didn't know it then, but it was the final goodbye. A month after Kaka returned, Krishna rang to say that he had died – of what precisely no one knew. I was speechless for days. The last link to my past was now gone, the last one in the village who had grown up in the shadows of indenture, lived through the Depression, the strikes in the sugar industry, the Second World War. I felt cheated. I still feel his loss.

When I returned to Fiji, I knew that I had to go to Labasa. Perhaps it is the ancient urge to say the final goodbye

in person. I wanted to know the exact circumstances of Kaka's death. Only then could I finally come to terms with my grief. He was very happy to return home, back in his own house, back to his routine, people told me. Then one day, all of a sudden, Lali, the cow, died. Kaka was distraught; she was like family to him. Lali was his wife's gift to him when their first grandchild was born. He used to talk to her, caress her forehead, religiously feed her para grass every morning and afternoon, wash her once a week. People said that Kaka talked to Lali as if he was talking to wife, telling her his doubts and fears. Using her as a sounding board for his ideas and plans. Now a loved link to that past was gone. He was heart broken. In fact he had died from a massive heart attack. The last words Kaka spoke before he collapsed, one of his grandchildren remembered, was 'Sukhraji, *taharo, hum aait haye*,' Sukhraji, wait (for me), I am coming.

8

A Change of Seasons

But it was all over too soon
When somebody decided you'd
Better move on.

Aap kab aawaa, the boy asked, when did you come? He meant, 'How long have you been waiting.' Tall and dark, perhaps sixteen or seventeen, he was a car wash boy at the Laucala BP Station. I used to go there every second weekend to have my car washed and polished, tyre pressure checked, oil changed. The boy, Vinay, was a new recruit at the gas station. He looked startled, almost frightened. If I had been waiting long and his boss found out, he would be fired, perhaps slapped around the ears for slacking off, being negligent. He looked at me pleadingly and then gazed at the ground expecting to be told off, sworn at. Anything would be better than to be reported. He had been cramming for his exams at the back of the garage.

'Just this minute,' I said, although I had been waiting for about ten. Vinay knew the truth. 'I will do a special job for you today, sir,' he said. 'The usual will do, son,' I replied as I tapped him gently on the shoulder with the smile of a benign uncle.

A word he had spoken had given him away and made me feel warm and curious about him. *Aawaa*: that was pure Labasa, a rustic word long forgotten in Viti Levu, a signifier of our primitive country origins, a badge of inferiority in their eyes. *Aayaa* is what they say, a politer word, more literary. Vinay and I are *kaivata*, as the Fijians might say, people from the same place and so somehow distantly related.

I read the weekend papers sitting on a tree stump under the lanky acacia tree while Vinay goes about his work. Cakes of mud dislodge from the mudguard under pressurized water, the sides are splashed and then rubbed with cloth, the hubcaps cleaned, the inside vacuumed, and mirrors wiped. Vinay's speed and precision suggest he is a practised hand at this. Occasionally he throws a furtive glance at me to see if I am watching. I wave back gently. His dark face glistens with sweat in the hard sun and unbearable humidity.

The heat and the humidity, the look of desperation on Vinay's face, that haunting and hunted look in the eyes of a boy ageing before his time, are familiar, and bring back memories of a distant past. I recall early rainy mornings when Mother and I went to work for Santu, our neighbour. Mother received five shillings for a day's backbreaking work in knee-deep dirty water transplanting rice seedlings and I, a 'mere child,' one shilling. There was no break from the wind and the pelting rain; a specified number of rice seedling bundles had to be planted by the end of the day before we were paid, much like the daily task under *girmit*. We return home around dusk, but mother's day was not finished. She had to prepare dinner, before we all went to bed only to start all over again the next morning.

Then there was work at Ram Dayal's cane farm. Mr Dayal had been promised our labour during the school

holidays, for what amount we didn't know. But there we were, just children in primary school, hoeing and fertilizing cane, cleaning the outer edges of the farm of weed and overgrown grass, braving hornets, feeding the cattle, sometimes fetching well water for their cooking. No money passed through our hands. It went straight to Father, who used it to buy books, clothes and food for his young family. We didn't ask any questions; that was the way things were done. We were all grateful just to get by, happy to contribute whatever we could to our perennially strained household budget.

Our routine at home was set before and after school: regular work in the mornings taking cattle to the fields, feeding them cut para grass in the evenings, tending vegetable gardens, gathering firewood from the neighbouring hills, fetching water from the well, keeping the compound clean. And the same repetitive meals in the evenings: dhall, rice, pumpkin or jack- fruit curries, ground chillies, mint and garlic for chutney. Once, for some reason, we had an abundance of pumpkins, so much so that we had it for breakfast, lunch and dinner. My younger brothers got so fed up that one day they secretly poured a pot of boiling water on one of the plants. It died soon afterwards. Mother was perplexed, and Father wanted to find the culprit, who would then get the thrashing of his life, but not a word leaked out until years later by which time we could have a good laugh.

Our experience was common. Tabia was a poor village on the outer edges of prosperity. There were no paved roads, no running water, no electricity, just thatched huts for homes and wells for water. Attending school by the late 1950s had become the norm, though completing primary schooling was another matter. And no one had any idea of a possible future

career. Working at the local banks was the most prestigious job we could aspire to. We all longed for some employment outside the village, anything that would take us away from the local rut. One of my fondest memories of those years is of watching planes flying from Waiqele airport over our village. I would gaze at the plane until it dissolved into a blip and then disappeared from sight. Then for a long time afterwards, I would think about the plane, the people who might be in it, where they were going, whether one day I too might get to fly to strange, unknown places. Paradise was always somewhere else, deepening the aching desire to leave.

All this was more than forty years ago. Now, Tabia is a changed place. A modern tar-sealed highway connects the village to other parts of Vanua Levu, there is electricity, piped water and television in most homes; the village has a vibrant primary school and well-regarded secondary college to which students come from all parts of the island. People from the village have travelled widely, and some have children abroad. Tiny tots when I was there, Tabia boys and girls have done well, joined the professions, gone places, made something of themselves. I had myself moved on and returned only intermittently, for wedding, funerals and rare family get-togethers, until the death of my parents practically severed the link. Tabia is now an evanescent memory.

Vinay reminded me of the world from which I had come, but it hurt that this child now, all these years later, through no fault of his own, was undergoing a misery I thought had long ceased. I knew about the non-renewal of leases and of the general exodus from the once flourishing cane farms in northern Vanua Levu (Naqiqi, Wavu Wavu, Daku, Lagalaga, Wainikoro). Among the refugees, for that is the right word,

were members of my own extended family, though my contact with them had long been broken through years of absence and short returning visits. For many of them, I was a 'name,' a good name, to be sure, but just a name. There was something about Vinay that aroused my curiosity about things I had heard and read about, but never really considered.

'You go to school, right?' I asked him after he had finished washing the car. 'Yes, sir,' he answers politely. 'From Labasa, right?' 'Yes, sir.' He looked perplexed, wondering what he had done or said to give away his identity. People from Labasa, I learn later, are not always welcome in Suva. Regarded as unrefined country people at the best of times, the butt of jokes about the way they talk and walk and dress, they are now derided openly for being diligent and hardworking, taking any and all jobs for pay which Suva people consider beneath them.

'How long have you been here, Vinay?' I ask. 'Since last year, sir." With your family or by yourself?' It was not an empty question. There was a time when some of the wealthier and well-connected families sent their sons for a bit of high schooling in Suva to improve their chances of securing a good job. 'My father, mother and my younger sister, sir.' 'She goes to school too?' 'Yes, sir, she is in Form Five.' 'And you are in?' 'Form Seven, sir.' 'I would like to meet your family some time,' I said.

Vinay seemed horrified by my request, as if this was the most unusual thing anyone could have asked him. 'Sir?' he asked, saying, in effect: why in the world would you like to do such a thing. 'Yes, some day, Vinay, I would like to meet them.' With that, I handed him a five-dollar note as a bonus. No one was watching. Vinay looked into my eyes with a sadness that burnt deep into my memory. 'Get something for yourself and

your sister, beta,' I said, patting his head gently. 'Thank you very much, sir,' he said as he turned away wiping tears from his eyes.

The following Saturday I again went to the gas station to meet Vinay. He was courteous and respectful. 'Ram Ram, sir,' he said. 'Ram, Ram,' I replied. 'Will tomorrow be all right for me to visit you?' 'Sir?' 'Tomorrow. Just a short visit to meet your parents. I am from Labasa too, in case you don't know.' 'Sir, my father knows you. He says you are a very famous man.' 'You know us Labasans. We are all famous,' I said. Vinay smiled. 'Tomorrow at ten, then?' 'Yes, sir,' Vinay replied hesitantly. I understood the reason for his reluctance. He was a proud boy who did not want me to see his desperately poor family circumstance. His pride would be injured in case I thought any less of him because of his background. But I was determined.

Newtown Mini Market is where Vinay arranged to meet me. It is towards the higher end of the Khalsa Road that links Kinoya and Tacirua. The road dissects a congested corridor. The Kinoya end is the more settled part. The concrete houses are bigger, more substantial, set apart from each other by respectable distance, closer to the shopping centre, bread shops and churches. The Tacirua end is clogged, full of sardine-can tenements of rickety roof iron and stray wood, one on top of another, some perched precariously on a ridge leading to a gully, many partly shielded from view from the road by tall grass, some without electricity, many without water, all testimony to human misery.

I arrive about ten minutes early. 'Mini Market' is a serious misnomer. The place is empty, deserted, strewn with garbage. All that survives is a crumbling corrugated iron shed resembling a chicken coop, full of rotting, crumpled cardboard boxes and bits and pieces of wood. Once this place would have

been a bustling local centre, selling vegetables, eggs, root crops, perhaps even a live chicken or two to the surrounding neighbourhoods. But all that must have been a long time ago. As with so many things in Fiji, temporariness is the order of the day here. I wonder who its owner was. Probably some evicted Indo-Fijian tenant who was here for a while and then moved out to something better elsewhere.

Behind the chicken coop is a well maintained house painted dark blue. A Fijian man, fresh from a shower and wrapped in a floral sulu walks towards me. He has probably seen me leaning against my car, waiting, for some time. 'You looking for someone?' he asks. 'Yes, a boy named Vinay.' 'The thin fallah who wash car here?' 'Probably.' 'He live on the other side of the road, over there,' the man says, pointing me to a collection of tin huts on top of a grassy hill. 'Thanks, Bro, but I will wait here for just a bit longer.' 'Come, have some chai *Bhaiya*,' have some tea, brother, he says. 'Thanks, but I have just had breakfast.' This typically generous Fijian offer to share food and drink, so common in the villages, still survives in this depressed corner of Suva.

Vinay apologises for being late. We walk along a muddy path to his 'home.' Barely clothed curious children look silently in our direction. They are not used to seeing well-dressed, important-looking strangers coming to their settlement. Both sides of the path are overgrown with grass. and fresh dog shit is all over the place. There is a foul smell in the air, a mixture of burning kerosene and urine. Vinay's place is a typical squatter settlement structure, a one-bedroom, rusting corrugated-iron shack.

Vijay, Vinay's father, greets me at the front door with both hands and invites me in. He has none of Vinay's unease

or embarrassment. Inside, I sit on a wooden crate covered with piece of white cloth. Around forty or so, Vijay is prematurely aged, his skin dry and leathery from prolonged exposure to the sun. His wife, Vimla, returns from fetching water from the communal tap outside. 'Ram, Ram *Bhaiya*,' she says as she covers her head and walks past me shyly. A village girl in single overflowing dress she too looks worn out, her unkempt hair greying at the edges. *Thoda chai banaao*, Vijay tells his wife, make some tea. 'Vinay, get some *biskut* from the shop.' Such hospitality amid this squalor feels incongruous. I kick myself: I should have brought something along. I hand Vinay a five-dollar note, which he accepts reluctantly after a nod from his father.

The room is spartan, small, probably ten by twelve, very much like the rooms in the lines during *girmit*. A rolled up mattress is stacked against the wall. I imagine the whole family sleeps on it. A couple of tin crates and musty cardboard boxes contain all the family's possessions. Vijay's wife is boiling water on an ancient darkened stove, and the room reeks of kerosene and smoke. A dozen or so cups and plates are heaped in a large enamel bowl. From the open spaces of a rural farming community to this cramped, sooty and smelly place must have been quite a traumatic journey.

Vijay mixes a bowl of grog. *Bas ek dui piyaali*, just a bowl or two. That is an euphemism as well as an excuse. Vijay, I can tell, is a seasoned kava drinker. His skin is cracked and the corners of his mouth sickly white from excessive indulgence. Vijay begins by making family connections. In no time, it is established that he is distantly related to me by marriage to one of my cousins about whom I know nothing but pretend familiarity. He is from Naleba, one of the early cane districts of

Labasa, notorious during indenture for rampant overseer violence. The place was emptying out as cane leases were not renewed. Vijay was a part of the exodus. 'It all came as a shock,' he says. 'One day, a Land Rover arrived. Three Fijians got out. They had some papers in their hands. One of them said that our rent was in arrears. Unless we paid up in a week, our lease will end.' *Poth bharo nahin to jameen khalaas. Khali ek hafta bacho.* 'Just like that?' 'Just like that!'

Vijay needed about two thousand dollars, but that kind of money was not around. There were no money lenders left in the village, and the banks in town would not come to the party. With so many leases expiring and the future of the sugar industry shaky, the risk was too great. Besides, the ten-acre plot was held jointly in the name of Vijay and his brother. And Vijay was already in debt. 'Father's illness cost us a lot. Several months in the hospital. We gave him a good farewell.' *Achhha se bida kiya gay.* Then there was the expense of the children's education: building fees for the school, books and uniforms for the children. Vijay was not alone: nearly everyone in the village was teetering on the verge of bankruptcy.

'Did you try and find the Fijian landlord to see if you could strike a deal, maybe get into share-cropping or something?' I had heard of similar arrangements in parts of Viti Levu. '*Bhaiya*, I didn't know who the landlord was. *Maloomen nahin.* There were no Fijians in the village. We had no idea who owned the land. We got this lease a very long time ago, when my father was a child. We never had any dealings with Fijians. We only knew the [Native Land Trust] Board.' The creation of that organisation had brought about a semblance of order and stability in the system of land leases. Instead of dealing with individual landowners, the tenants

dealt only with the NLTB. But it also extinguished personal relations between the landlord and the tenant. There was no human face, no human contact to mediate in times of crisis like this.

'Have you found out the name of the landowner now?' 'No,' Vijay replied. 'It will be no use. They always take money and demand other goods. This *kerekere*, the borrowing business never ends. A chicken today, a goat next week, money for funerals and weddings the week after. Bottomless well. These young fellows are greedy. Easy come, easy go. The older generation was different.' Rapacity among landowners in Fiji is not uncommon although it has increased in recent decades of relative prosperity in the farming community.

But there was another motivation to move. It was clear that there was no future on the farm for the family. 'There was a time when the farm was all we had,' Vijay said. 'We all grew up on it. Our parents raised us on the farm. That was our world. But now, the income is not enough for all of us. There is always someone working outside, which keeps us going. 'Otherwise we will be finished.' This, too, is a recent phenomenon: the farm principally as a place of residence, not as a source of livelihood.

Vijay was concerned about his children's future. 'There is nothing for them here,' he says. 'What will they do?' he asks. 'We live for our children.' It was for that reason that Vijay, like so many others, had decided to leave Labasa for good once the lease was not renewed. In Suva, there was some hope; in Labasa, there was none. 'I am glad it is happening now, when I am still strong and can work. A few years later, I might not have been able to do this.' *Wahi pinjada men bund rahit.* 'We

would have remained trapped in that place forever. We should have seen this coming a long time ago and left then.'

I asked about Vijay's neighbours. He pointed out the tenements belonging to former Labasans. There were at least a dozen around Vijay's place. 'We have all become family,' Vijay tells me. 'We look out for each other.' They were the new *jahajibhais*, brothers of the crossing like their *girmitiya* forebears, facing the same hurt and humiliation, the same levelling fate. Everyone there was a refugee. Whether you were from Nagigi or Naleba, Daku or Dreketilailai, a Madrassi or a Kurbi, Hindu or a Muslim, you were a Labasan first and foremost. There was no going back: the rupture was final.

'What do people do around here?' I ask. 'Anything, *Bhaiya*. We will take any job. A job is a job. It is the question of our livelihood.' *Pet aur baal bachhon ke sawaal haye*. Casual labouring, house-help, grass cutting, car washing, nightwatchman. Some had taken to carpentry and others to bus and taxi driving. The more skilled ones found jobs as sales assistants in the bigger supermarkets while a few women found employment in the garment factories. The old entrepreneurial spirit still exists, I realise, now fuelled by desperation and a very real fear of descending into debilitating destitution among strangers in this alien place.

But the Labasans' enterprising spirit, their willingness to make a go of things, has made them targets for many Suva residents. Not knowing that I too was from Labasa, people were free with their prejudices. Labasans are prepared to work for dirt, I am told. They have no ethics, no sense of responsibility. Greedy 'like hell,' they take on work beyond their competence, making a mess in the process. 'No one who wants good work ever hires these fellows the second time

around,' a man says to me. 'They are so clannish, so uncouth,' *ek dam ganwaar*. A few weeks back, I was reminded, a small car repair garage owned by a Labasan in Kalabu was burnt down. The police did nothing, they probably had a hand in it. No charges were ever laid. 'What would you expect in this cut-throat business,' man says. 'We have to earn our living somehow too.'

'*Bhaiya*, these people are jealous,' Vijay said to me. *Bahut bhaari jalan bhav*. 'They won't do the work themselves and they make threats against us. They look down on us. They call this place *Chamar tola*,' the place of untouchables, the lowest of the low. As Vijay spoke, I realised the people from Labasa were the new pariahs, on the outer fringes of society. We were the butt of many a joke. Our speech was mocked, our preference for simpler things ridiculed. We were tolerated as country bumpkins.

Anti-Labasa prejudice goes back a long way, and is not without reason, although Labasans find hard to admit it. Vijay's words recalled my own first trip to Suva. It was in 1969. I had come to Suva with my uncle, my father's elder step-brother, to get glasses for my deteriorating eyesight. The stories I heard about the visitors have remained with me. In the mornings, men from Labasa looked for *datoon*, raw twigs, preferably the *bariara* stem, to clean their teeth. Most had never used a toothbrush in their lives. But twigs were not easily found, so men took long walks in the evenings searching for them. Much to the amusement of the locals, Labasa people made slurping noises as they drank their tea and belched loudly in appreciation of a good meal. They thought nothing of clearing their throats and coughing the phlegm out on the lawn. Used to letting go in the open, they frequently took

a leak on the toilet floor and urinated while having a shower, causing a foul smell. They used water (from empty beer bottles) after toilet, not toilet paper, which they thought unhygienic, leaving behind a mess which women and children hated cleaning.

People tried to create a sense of community in this place of chaos and anxiety. There was a *Ramayan mandali* in the squatter settlement, and people took turns hosting recitals at their homes. Unlike many Suva residents, Labasa people were punctilious about rituals and protocols. Just as they had done back home for decades, they did not have meat or alcohol at home for a prescribed number of days before the event. This was very familiar to me. In the Tabia of my childhood, people were fastidious about rituals. *Hanuman Katha, Satyanarayani puja, Shiva Ratri, Ram Naumi* and many others were performed with excessive religiosity. Once I was impatient with this sort of thing; religion was the opiate of the masses, I believed in my radical, irreverent youth; education, I was convinced, was the true liberator of humanity.

But I realised as I looked around how few outlets there were for social interaction and entertainment. Regular gatherings encouraged social cohesiveness and provided the people with a sense of community. They gave life amid all this dreariness a certain rhythm, purpose and identity, something to do outside work. And the story of Lord Rama held a certain resonance in the lives of an uprooted group. Rama had been exiled from his kingdom of Ayodhya through no fault of his own, in deference to his distraught father's wish to fulfil a promise to one of his wives, but he did return, after fourteen years, a triumphant prince. Good had in the end triumphed over evil. Their agony too would end one day, people consoled

themselves, for they too were innocent victims of circumstances beyond their control. The *Ramayan* had provided great spiritual and emotional comfort to the *girmitiyas* at a time of great distress and disruption in their lives. I imagine it is providing solace to these people as well.

Still, glimpses of hope and escape from this wretched place were rare. 'My main concern is my children,' Vijay said again. Their future was weighing on his mind. 'I feel so sad that I can't give them what they deserve, what every child deserves.' *Bachpana ek hi baar aawe haye*. You have only one childhood. 'But you are giving them what every parent should and what every child deserves — an education.' I meant it. Vijay nodded in approval, but I suppose he had in mind good clothes, money for the occasional outing, video games. 'Yes,' Vijay said, 'it is mainly because of Vinay and Shivani that we decided to move here.' Such beautiful, evocative names in this empty, shattered place, I thought.

Vijay was doing what Indo-Fijian parents had always done: sacrificing whatever they had to educate their children. That, more than anything else, was the reason for our success. The story was familiar to me; I was a part of it. At an early age, we were told that there was no future on the farm for all the six boys. We would have to look for other opportunities. Education was the only way out. We pursued it single-mindedly and succeeded. The path we trod all those years ago, alone and often without a helping hand, was now being pursued by a new generation at a time when the sky should have been the limit for them.

With one difference. We grew up in a settled environment and in a home which we proudly called our own. We were poor, but a home was a home. The routine and rhythms

of village life, deadening at times, defined the parameters of our existence. We knew that we belonged in the village, that we had a place in it. The village gave us an identity. We felt secure. We said proudly that we were from Tabia. With no idea about the outside world or of the changes ahead that would disrupt our lives irreparably and take us to unimagined places, we cherished the idea that Tabia would always be our home. It would be there for us always, welcoming. That sense of attachment has diminished with time, but it once had a powerful hold on our youthful emotions. I wonder if Vinay and Shivani will ever know the joys of belonging and attachment to a place that they can call home, the comfort of being members of a community, the innocence of a carefree childhood.

Vijay is clearly worried about his family's safety. They are unwanted, uninvited strangers in this place. The news of robberies and the sight of wayward unemployed boys roaming the streets worry him. There have been reports of a few assaults, some stray incidents of stone-throwing at nights and burglaries. Vijay does not have much to lose. There is no television or modern accessories such as a refrigerator in the house. But it is the violation of privacy, the sense of being violated, that worries people. Several fathers have formed an informal group and take turns to see the girls on to the bus every morning and wait for them at the bus stop after school. The safety and protection of girls especially is paramount with Indo-Fijian parents. It has always been that way.

Newtown is the first but will certainly not be the last stop for most refugees. Some have moved to larger plots of leased lands on the outskirts of Nausori — Korociriciri, Nakelo and Koroqaqa, while others have gone towards Navua. There they plant dalo and cassava and vegetables and sell

them at roadside stalls to travellers on the Queen's Highway. I have talked to some of them. 'This is good life,' one of them said to me. 'We get *nagad paisa* [cash] everyday. We are our own boss. We sleep peacefully at night.' 'You won't get back to cane farming then?' '*Ganna men koi fayada nahin haye*,' a man says to me, there is no profit in sugar cane farming, repeating Vijay's sentiment. 'Pocket change' is how someone had described the earnings from cane. 'All that hard work: what for? You pay rent, Fijians demand kerekere all the time and before you know it, all the money is gone. No, this is good.' The reluctance to return to the cane farm was a familiar story throughout Fiji.

Vijay was considering moving to Nadi. He had met someone in Suva market who knew someone who was migrating. But he didn't want to sell his land. Would Vijay mind some share-cropping arrangement? 'I don't know what will happen,' he said to me, 'but I'm sure it will be better than this place.' Of that there was no doubt in my mind. 'There are many good schools there,' he said, 'I have seen them myself.' And he would fit in better in that environment anyway. '*Gaon ke admi log ke gaon hi acchha lagi*.' Village people will always be attracted to villages. Vijay was a true son of the soil who found Suva suffocating.

Shivani arrived after we had been talking for a couple of hours. She had a clutch of books and pads in her hands. 'Been studying, yes?' I ask. 'Yes, sir,' she replies. 'What subjects?' 'Science.' 'And what do you hope to become?' 'A nurse or a doctor, sir.' That kind of ambition from this sort of background sounds ludicrous: from the slums of Suva to the heights of the medical profession? But that, more or less, was how we all started — with nothing. 'One step at a time' was

the motto of my generation. 'Why medicine?' I ask, knowing full well that it is the profession of choice for most people in Fiji, or anywhere else for that matter. 'Because I want to help people, sir,' she says. 'Yes, beta, making a difference and helping people is always satisfying. I am sure you will make a great doctor. Remember to look well after this uncle in his doddery old age.' She smiles and walks towards her mother.

Vinay has been in the background, serving us tea but otherwise listening intently to our conversation. There is a kind of sadness about him. As the older son, he knows that the responsibility of looking after his sister and his parents will fall on him. He helps out whenever he can. In addition to washing cars during weekends, he works at the local store down the road most evenings. The customer traffic is light at night, and he gets a free meal and a place to study as well as loaves of bread and occasionally a can of fish on the weekends. He frequently sleeps at the shop under the counter next to bags of onions and potatoes. I sense that Vinay will not talk freely in the presence of his family, and yet I am curious about his story. I have been at Vijay's place for longer than I had expected. I have already disrupted their schedule enough. I apologise as I leave, and promise to see Vinay during the weekend at the gas station.

The visit lingers in my mind for a long time. It is too close to the bone for comfort. I have travelled that route myself, as have so many others before and after me. It must have been some similar experience of disruption and dislocation caused by a prolonged drought, a death in the family, indebtedness, a quarrel, an act of rebellion, that led the *girmitiyas* to emigrate, with what hopes and fears we can only guess. They probably had no precise idea of their destination,

but most thought they would be back one day. That day of reckoning never came. Now, a hundred years later, people are on the move again, uprooted, in search of a better life.

I take Vinay to the Victoria Arcade coffee shop on Saturday afternoon after he finishes work. 'Do you miss Labasa?' I ask him. 'Yes, sir, very much.' What particularly?' 'My friends, sir.' I wait for him to continue. 'All my friends I went to school with. We played soccer in the afternoons, swam in the river, walked in the mountains, played tricks on each other, stole mangoes and watermelon from our neighbours' farms. But then they all left one by one as their leases expired. I don't know if I will ever meet them again. I don't know where they are.' They had promised to keep in touch through letters, but they remained just that, promises, unfulfilled.

Once again, the *girmit* experience comes to mind. After a long traumatic journey lasting weeks in often rough seas, *girmitiyas* would arrive in Fiji and after about two weeks of quarantine detention at Nukulau would be allocated to plantations across the country. The officials made sure that people from the same locality in India were not sent to one place for fear of insurrection. The *girmitiyas* would cry and hug each other and promise to keep in touch. They never met again, starting afresh in new places with new people, old memories erased. I could understand Vinay's anguish.

'Anyone special you miss?' It is a kind of question only an older uncle is allowed to ask. It is very unlikely that anyone in the family would know about Vinay's private life. Children never talk about it to their parents, and Shivani was too young to confide in. 'Sir?' I smiled. Averting his eyes, Vinay looked at the ground. 'Daya, sir,' he replied after a long silence. 'She was my best friend. She used to bring me special lunches and

sweets at Diwali. We used to do our homework together. I always wanted to be close to her, to protect her.' 'Your parents knew?' 'Yes, sir, they liked her.' 'Where is she now?' 'Don't know, sir. Somewhere in Viti Levu.' 'Father's name?' 'Rajendra Prasad, from Daku. People from Labasa know him as Daku Prasad.' 'I will see if I can find out.' One thing about Labasa is that nearly everyone knows everyone else. Daku had gone to Navua, I found out. One Sunday I went out for a drive to look him up. He had left the place some time ago, a stall keeper at the roadside told me. Try Sigatoka or Nadi, I was advised. 'Tracking him in those places will be like trying to find a needle in a haystack,' I said, if you pardon the cliché. 'God willing, I will find her one day, sir,' Vinay said.

I detected steely determination in Vinay's voice, and a trace of anger too. Enforced removal from the farm had embittered him deeply. To see his proud father reduced to impotent fury, seeking mercy from the officials of the Native Land Trust Board, unable to raise a loan to pay the rent, had hurt and outraged him deeply. No son wants to see his father humiliated. 'What wrong did we do, sir, that they took our land away?' he asks. 'It is not as if they are doing anything with it. You will see it for yourself, sir, that our cane land is now returning to bush.' That was certainly true in many parts of northern Vanua Levu. Non-renewal of leases was one cause of the decline of the sugar industry. 'They will take Fiji and all of us down with them, sir.' I understood Vinay's anger, but how do you explain to a hurt young man that we were always literal as well as metaphorical tenants in Fiji, tolerated as long as we knew our place in the broad scheme of things, that we were never allowed to belong?

'What are you studying, Vinay,' I ask. 'Science subjects, sir.' 'What would you like to study at university?' 'University, sir?' He reacted as if I had asked the most impossible question. 'Why not? It should be a natural thing for a bright boy like you.' 'I would like to become an accountant, sir.' 'Is that what you want?' Vinay hesitated momentarily. 'That is what *Pitaji* [father] wants me to do. He says it will be easier to find a job as an accountant.' 'And probably easier to migrate too, I should think.' 'Sir, but I really want to do history and politics.' That surprised me. No one I had spoken to had ever expressed an interest in those subjects. We historians were like dinosaurs, I thought, irrelevant, like deaf people answering questions no one had ever asked us. History could not make anything happen. The subject wasn't taught in schools, or was taught minimally as part of more amorphous social studies.

'Why history?' I asked. 'I like stories, sir, true stories about real people.' I wouldn't argue with that. It was a good description of the discipline. 'Sir, I don't want to migrate. I want to live here and make my little contribution.' 'Vinay, that's admirable, but have you thought about jobs?' 'I will become a high schoolteacher, sir. That's where all our problems start.' 'But that's not where you will end your career,' I said. 'No sir, God willing.' We parted with promises to keep in touch, and we did intermittently for a few years.

Vinay had gradually slipped from my mind until last year when I was invited to be the chief guest at the annual prize giving ceremony at Namaka Secondary in Nadi. Imagine my surprise to see Vinay there! He was the school's head of social science. 'Good to see you, sir,' he said at tea after the formal ceremonies. He had been at the school for a couple of years. 'So you kept your promise to become a teacher, Vinay.' 'Yes,

sir,' he said smiling. Vinay was confident and articulate, not the shy, awkward young man I had met a few years back. Over dinner at his flat in Namaka that night, Vinay told me the details. He had done well in high school to win a scholarship to university. There he had excelled as well, winning prizes and awards all prominently displayed on the walls. He was encouraged to go on to graduate studies, but Vinay declined. 'I had to look after my parents and Shivani,' he said without a trace of bitterness. 'They depended on me,' he said. Responsibility was responsibility. Such an admirable spirit of sacrifice, so rare these days, but somehow with Vinay, I was not surprised.

'Still thinking about history?' I ask. 'Yes, sir, but now I want to make some history.' 'Is that so! Wonderful.' Vinay was doing by correspondence a law degree from Waikato University in New Zealand. He had already completed half the degree. Once it was finished, he would leave teaching to become a full-time lawyer and eventually enter politics. He was active on the local scene, as an elected member of the Nadi Town Council representing the Nawaka Ward. He was close to the powerbrokers of the local branch of the Labour Party and was one of its rising stars. I felt for him. His passion for public service had not dimmed, but I also knew of the bumps he would encounter on the road ahead. A political career in the Indo-Fijian community is not for idealists, or the faint-hearted. 'You cut steel with steel,' people say. It is as brutal as that.

'How is Vijay?' I ask. '*Pitaji* died two years ago. Heart attack.' I touched Vinay's shoulder in sympathy. 'Too young to go now,' I said. 'But that, sir, is not uncommon these days. The stress, the heartache, the glass ceiling in government service, the name-calling by religious bigots, the displacement of our

farmers all take their toll.' Vinay had chosen his words carefully. 'Shivani?' 'She graduated last year with a nursing degree and then married and migrated to New Zealand. Mum is with her too, looking after their infant daughter.' 'Remind her of her promise to look after me in old age,' I joked.

'And Daya? Remember you said you will find her one day.' 'Well, sir, I found her at last in Nadi, but by then it was too late.' Daya's parents had settled in Votualevu as share-croppers after moving from Navua. A family visiting from Canada looking for a bride for their son had chosen Daya. Vinay wasn't surprised: she was a beautiful young woman with fine, almost film star features. Her parents were ecstatic. Daya was going to be their passport to freedom finally. Everyone envied her, the first in the family to migrate. By the time Vinay found Daya working as a cashier at the local ANZ Bank, her marriage papers had already been signed and wedding preparations were well under way. Daya was distraught, but there was nothing she could do to extricate herself from the arrangements. Her parents had spoken for her, and that was that. Yes, *It was over all too soon*. Vinay was similarly helpless. He did not have the one thing that every struggling family in the community prized above all else: a foreign passport. With touching resignation, he said, 'Some things are not meant to be, sir.' 'Yes, son,' I said gently taping him on the shoulder in sympathy, recalling a couple of lines from Lord Tennyson: *Let what is broken so remain/ The gods are hard to reconcile*.

Yes, that Passport. That damned foreign passport. To anywhere.

9

An Australian Fusion

'Please Uncle, talk to Dad. You are the only one he will listen to.' Rani, my niece, sounded desperate. 'See you at the Black Pepper for lunch, Beta.'

Such calls are a regular part of my life. As the eldest male in the extended family in Australia, a community elder, I am contacted once a week or so about all kinds of favours: help with visa applications, advice about bonds for intending family migrants, scholarships for children, hostel accommodation. It's an obligation.

Ramesh, Rani's father, was my cousin from Labasa. He is from the wealthier branch of the extended family. I often stayed with him and his wife, Sharmila, whenever I visited Sydney to buy Fijian fruits and vegetables from the shops and markets in Liverpool. They were my window on the life of our community in the sprawling more affordable western suburbs, where most of the Indo-Fijian migrants settle.

Ramesh was a successful migrant. He had a house, a good job, two cars, his son was in high school and his daughter at university. Sharmila was a secretary in the state

government. People looked up to Ramesh for the good standard he was setting for the new arrivals. He was a regular speaker at weddings and funerals and community gatherings. He was a good singer of *bhajans*, Hindu devotional songs. He played the harmonium well.

I noticed in a corner next to the bedroom in his house pictures of Hindu gods and goddesses and a place of prayer: *lota*, *thali*, dry flowers, a religious book covered with red cloth, a harmonium, *dholak*, *tabla* and *dandtal*. This side of Ramesh was new to me. I hadn't known him as a particularly religious type. Now he insisted that his children take language and cultural lessons at the local *mandir*, learn proper ways of doing things. I understood the impulse but knew that we were fighting a losing battle. Our world will go with us.

Once, expecting my visit, Ramesh organized a *havan* at his place. It was a full-blown affair, complete with solemn readings of *shlokas* from books I had never heard of before. The priest was from India and he insisted on doing things the proper way, the way they were done back home rather than the corrupted way they were done in Fiji. Everyone present recited the *Gyatri Mantra* and joined in singing verses that were completely unfamiliar to me. I had never heard them in Fiji. Some of the men wore Indian-style dress, while women were in sparkling *salwar kamiz* and *sarees*.

That evening, after the guests had gone and we were relaxing with a bottle of Black Label, I asked Ramesh, 'When did all this *sadhugiri* start,' this passion for religion? 'Since coming to Australia,' he said. In this, Ramesh was not alone. Religion was the eternal opiate. 'But why this obsession with doing things the Indian way?' I wanted to know. 'India is our motherland, Bro.' 'I thought Fiji was.' 'Fiji was where we were

born. It is our *janambhumi* the place of our birth. It was never our spiritual home. India is our *matrabhumi*,' our motherland, the land of our religion and culture.

There was bitterness in Ramesh's voice when he spoke of Fiji. Many Indians spoke distressingly about racial discrimination back home, the glass ceiling in the public service, the regular trashing of temples, the burglaries and the assaults. The land problem was uppermost in their minds. 'We even have to bury our dead on leased land,' Ramesh said. The plight of Indo-Fijian tenants forced off land they had occupied for generations hurt. 'Our grandparents built the damn place through their blood and sweat, and this is the treatment we get? How can we call Fiji home?'

Nikhil, the teenage son, was listening to our discussion intently. 'What have we done to claim it as our own, Dad,' he said. 'We can't even speak the language. We don't invite Fijians into our homes. They were there first. Why blame a whole race as if all Fijians are the same?' Nikhil's maturity surprised and delighted me. Ramesh was short with him. 'Yes, but how many of them lifted their finger when we were hurt? Kicked in the gut? They were all rubbing their hands in glee, looking forward to taking our land, our homes, our jobs, our businesses.'

'We have to look at the larger picture, Bro,' Ramesh continued as I sat pondering Nikhil's point about home and belonging. 'Have you been to India recently?' Ramesh asked. I hadn't. 'India is going places. It will become a superpower in my lifetime.' He continued as if he was talking to himself: 'We can't escape our heritage, Bro. In the end, we are all Indians. That is the truth. When Australians ask you 'where are you from,' they think you are from India. When you say Fiji, they

say 'but you are not a real Fijian. You don't have bushy hair. You don't play rugby. You don't smile.'

Ramesh had bought hook, line and sinker into the rightwing Hindu view of the world. He was an ardent supporter of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, which sought to promote a pan-Hindu fraternity. He regularly visited the web sites engaged in wars of words about India and Hinduism. For Ramesh, the fount of all knowledge was the ancient Indus civilization. He supported the destruction of the Babri Mosque. He even bought into the argument that the Taj Mahal was built by Shah Jehan on the foundations of a destroyed Hindu temple. And unbelievably, he supported Bush's war on Iraq: one more Muslim country lacerated by the West, one less Muslim threat for Hindus to contend with. It was as simple as that for him: my enemy's enemy is my friend. On these matters, Ramesh always spoke with a calm, unswerving conviction.

Sharmila did not share his views. 'There you go again,' she would say whenever Ramesh launched one of his India lectures. 'We Indo-Fijians are the most hypocritical people in the world.' Indo-Fijian: that was how I described myself. Ramesh hated the word. 'I am an Indian, full stop, not some hybrid, hyphenated thing,' he used to say whenever the topic was raised. 'I hear they are trying to ban the word in Fiji. Identity theft, they call it. I rest my case. They won't allow us to identify with the land of our birth.'

'I am definitely not an Indian,' Sharmila continued, ignoring Ramesh. She was adamant about that. 'Do you know that these India Indians look down on us? We have lost our culture, they say, we can't speak the language properly, we are too Westernized. They snigger at the way we dress, the way we

walk and talk.' She was right about that. I had once read an article by an Indian journalist that created a furor in the community. In the article *Blood Cousins or Bloody Cousins*, the writer said he was ashamed to be identified as an Indo-Fijian, low types beyond redemption. Indo-Fijians gave all Indians a bad name.

'Shami, I agree with you,' I said. 'But don't you think we are superior to them?' I answered my question, 'I mean, there is no question. Of course we are. Has it ever occurred to you that they actually envy us, our freedom, the way we get along with other people, not hung up on status and rank?' 'Yes, Bhaiya, that's what I keep telling Ram, but he won't listen. He hangs out with them, mimics their ways, tries to be more Indian than Indians. Look at the way he dresses.' Ramesh had long flowing Indian cotton *kurta* and pants on. 'It's all a sham.'

'Not all Indians are like that, Shami,' Ramesh countered. 'You and I know many who are concerned about Fiji. Take Suresh Batra and Vandana, or Ravi Palat and Malti.' Sharmila cut in abruptly. 'Yes, but most have contempt for us. Remember what they say: four coups and how many Indians have shed an ounce of their blood to defend their honor? Always expecting the world to do something but not lifting a finger themselves. What kind of *kayarpan*, cowardice, is this?' 'But isn't that true, Shami? Aren't we the most cowardly people on earth? *Ek dam darpok*? Look at India. People there die to defend their land. Look at Kashmir.'

'Exactly,' Sharmila retorted. 'Fighting over some thing that belongs neither to India nor to Pakistan! Fighting is such a terrible, stupid way of solving problems. Call them cowards if you want, but our people in Fiji are wiser. All the guns are on the other side, so what do you do? We protest with our feet.

It makes sense. *Darpok* maybe, but we are *samajhdaar* as well,' wise.

Ramesh and Sharmila were chalk and cheese in their attitude to Fiji. Sharmila was a graduate of the multiracial Dudley High in Suva. She had Fijian, European, Part-European and some Chinese friends. 'People complained to my parents that I was being bad by associating with my friends. *Kharaab ladki*: bad girl. They thought my friends had loose morals, sitting ducks for rape or whatever. I hung around them because they were more fun. Indian girls rarely played sports, always clinging to each other, gossiping all the time. They called me a tomboy, the worst thing they could say about an Indian girl.'

In Sydney, Sharmila had met up with some of her former schoolmates. They occasionally went out to parties, visited the usual haunts at Circular Quay, had picnic at the Botanical Gardens. 'With them, I have so much fun, Bhaiya.' Fun was not a word she associated with the community functions she attended. 'With Indians, you go there all dolled up, sit quietly in a segregated corner with other women, talk about children, how well they were doing at school, the Bollywood videos they have watched, the latest model of washing machines they have bought, who is seeing whom. The men expect us to cook and clean while they sit and drink grog and gossip. Nothing's changed, Bhaiya. *Ek dam ganwaar ke aadat*,' behaving like real country bumpkins.

Sharmila told me about a Book Club for Fiji women she had once started. Only Fijians and Part-Europeans came. 'Bhaiya, you go to Indian homes and you won't find them reading. There are no books around. Most will never read a book. They think reading is for school children. 'I did all my

reading when I was in high school,' one woman told me the other day proudly. Grown-ups don't read, like grown up men don't cry. They can't spare time from window shopping or Tupperware parties or weddings and socials.'

Ramesh disapproved of Sharmila's social activities and the way she dressed — knee-length skirt, stylishly cut hair, the expensive perfume, but did not say much. Once or twice his friends had noticed her drinking wine at Darling Harbour with her friends, which hurt Ramesh. He was a leader of the community and expected his wife to have some respect for his position and status. 'I am married to you, Ramesh. I am not a doll that you dress up for show and then put back into the cupboard whenever you want. If you don't like it, you know what do.' Sharmila's sharpness had increased in the time I knew her.

When we returned to the topic of Fiji and the events there, Sharmila said pointedly, looking at Ramesh, 'We are quick to point a finger at others. How many of us can say we have really good Fijian friends? How many of us allow our children to go out with Fijian boys and girls? We look down at them. After all these years in Fiji, but how many of us can speak even basic Fijian, and understand Fijian culture? You can count them on the fingers of one hand.' Almost exactly Nikhil's words.

'That's not fair, Shami, and you know it, Ramesh responded indignantly. 'How many of us know our own culture and language? We are a bastard culture, if you ask me. And when were we ever allowed to learn Fijian? We were locked up in racial ghettoes all our lives. Race is a fact of life, we were told. We looked at each other through the glass curtain. Why wasn't Fijian taught in schools? Whose fault was that? It is not fair to blame our people for Fiji's mess.'

'Shami, Indians are not all peas in the same pod,' Ramesh said after some time although curiously, he saw Fijians in that way. 'They are not, although from your Christian perch, they might all appear the same.' Turning to me, Ramesh said, 'Bro, you know how it was in Labasa. North Indians thought the South Indians inferior. The Arya Samajis hardly mixed with the Sanatanis. And Hindus and Muslims lived apart on different planets. When did we ever have the time to reach out? We lived in a series of concentric circles, and by the time we reached its outer edges, it was time to kick the bucket.' 'Yes, divided by ancient prejudices and modern greed,' I added.

'Excuses and more excuses, as usual,' Sharmila replied dismissively. 'We were the immigrant community. We should have tried harder to adapt. We are repeating the same mistake here. We live in Australia, but how much of this country do we really understand? We congregate in our ghettoes and think this is Australia. Well, there's more to Australian culture than barbecues and beer and beaches. We must keep up with the Jones's, mustn't we? Yup, and never be backward in condemning Aussie lives as shallow and superficial. Never.'

'Shami, there you go again,' Ramesh said, trying to break Sharmila's onslaught. 'As I was telling Bro earlier, no matter how long you live here, you will not be an Anglo-Saxon, you will still have black or brown skin. They still ask 'Where're you from?' They say this is a multicultural country, but how much multiculturalism do you see in the government, in our schools and universities? When you apply for jobs, they talk about this gender equality thing. Does anyone talk about color?' Then, homing in to seal the argument, he said, 'Just look at New Zealand and see what they have been able to

achieve. Even their Governor-General is a person of color, with Fiji Indian roots to boot. That will never happen here. Conformity and subjection is what they want.'

'That's being so unfair, Ram,' Sharmila responded. 'Yes, this is a white man's country, I agree. But things have changed since we came here twenty odd years ago. Just look at the number of ethnic restaurants around us, welfare programs and government-funded languages classes for migrants, grants for cultural things. Look at the Bollywood movies in local theatres. Look at the spice and video shops. It is everywhere, Ram. Your Mandir, of which you are so proud, was partly government-funded. You condemn this country but you still take its generous dollars when it suits you. You want to have your cake and eat it too. That's our problem, not theirs.'

'When will we ever learn?' Sharmila continued. 'Bhaiya, Ramesh and I had this huge argument when Pauline Hanson made that speech in parliament about immigrants swamping this country. Our church group took a strong stand against her. We signed petitions and protested. We even took a delegation to Bob Carr. What did Ramesh do? He just sat here and did nothing. Actually, he scolded me. 'Hanson is not against us,' he said. 'She is against the slit-eyed types, people who pollute Cabramatta and fight gang wars. I hate them too. Such hypocrisy, and we have the gall to complain about Australian racism?'

I knew of our lack of historical sense. In Fiji, we hardly knew our past and, worse, did not seem to care about it. For many, the past was simply past. In Australia, our sense of disengagement was obvious. We had nothing to say about the 'Stolen Generation.' Wik and Mabo we did not care about. Ramesh had once said to me, 'We were not here when the land was stolen from the Abos,' Ramesh said. 'Aborigines,

Ramesh,' I reminded him sharply. 'They are the first people of this land.' 'Whatever. We're not a part of all that. Why should we lose sleep over somebody else's problem?'

'We can't pick and choose, Ramesh,' I said. 'Australian history is our history too now. We can't ignore that history because we live within its structures and beliefs. We are implicated because that past lives in us.' 'My history in Australia begins the day I arrived here,' Ramesh replied calmly. And then he launched into a long diatribe about how Australians had terrorized the *girmitiyas* in Fiji, turned them into slaves on the CSR plantations. 'This country should apologize to us, just as the Americans apologized to the Japanese for interning them in World War II. And hasn't Clinton apologized for slavery?' 'Ramesh,' I said, 'if the government does not apologize to the Aborigines for decades of abuse and neglect and physical violence, do you think they will apologize to us. For what? Get real.'

I was puzzled. Ramesh had lived in Australia and did not seem to care about its past, but became a volcano of passion about India and things Indian. Kashmir concerned him, and the Babri Mosque, the Hindu chauvinist Bajrang Dal, the Shiv Sena as well. He was the local representative of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and met regularly with visiting Indian cultural delegations and priests. Ramesh's religiosity did not impress Sharmila. On the contrary, she despised it. 'They read the *Ramayana* and the *Bhagvada Gita*, but do they truly understand their message?' she had once said to me. 'It's all to do with rituals and appearances, to see who does things bigger and better. It is all a huge competition thing. A *tamasha, dikhaawat ke liye*,' all for show.

I had noticed the proliferation of *mandalis* in Sydney. People from the same village or suburb in Fiji or one extended

family had a *mandali* of their own. Unlike Sharmila, I liked the cultural rituals and ceremonies. They were fun, brought our people together and kept them intact, gave them a sense of collective purpose and identity. The elaborate celebrations of *Holi* and *Diwali*, of *Ram Naumi* and *Shiv Ratri* among the Hindus and *Eid* and *Milad* among the Muslims kept alive a culture that would otherwise flounder in the arid urban sprawl of Australia. Ramesh seemed glad that at least on this point, I shared his views.

Neither Ramesh nor Sharmila were prepared to concede an inch. Such conversations must take place in other homes as well, I reckoned, people torn between cultures, making inner adjustments, confronting the long painful silences that intersperse family conversations. This is the fate of the first generation of migrants everywhere, I suppose, having left one home but not quite found another in their own lifetime, caught in-between. The problem is especially acute for the 'twice banished,' such as our people for whom questions about belonging and attachment often take complex, contested shapes. We belong neither here nor there, like the washer man's donkey, *Dhobi ke gadhaa, na ghar ke na ghat ke*, or else everywhere all at once.

I often wondered how children of migrants coped with it. I had seen many in Liverpool who seemed lost. Many, I was told, had ended up in the local court on charges of drug abuse. I had seen many affecting Australian mannerisms, speaking the local lingo in broad 'Austraaian' accents, wearing trendily torn jeans and T-shirts with blush-making slogans to slap across the face such as 'Masturbation Is Not A Crime,' 'Smell My Finger,' 'My Other Name Is Cock Screw.'

Once or twice I tried talking to some of the boys. They seemed slightly embarrassed, uneasy, in my presence, apologetic

about their shabby appearance. Proper deference to the elders of the community, acknowledgement of age, is still observed, even among the seemingly wayward youth. There is something warm and endearing about this. Some cultural habits are difficult to break. More often than not, I am addressed as 'Uncle' by Indo-Fijian children who are complete strangers.

Rani would have been in her mid-twenties, in her second year of university, working part-time. I had known her from when she was a teenager, when she first moved to Australia with her parents. She was more like her mother, feisty and opinionated, ready to take on the world. Rani was close to me. We could talk about things she couldn't with her own parents or even friends. Being an elder uncle has its advantages.

Rani was feeling her way around courses at the university, unsure of what she really wanted to do. This was a sore point with her parents, especially with Ramesh. 'Why can't you be like other girls,' he would admonish her, 'and do something useful, like accounting or economics? You have a future to think of. *Time barbaad nahi karo*,' don't waste your time. But Rani's heart was not in money making subjects. She was leaning towards primary school teaching.

'Primary school!' Ramesh exploded. That for him was the end of the world. 'Do you think we came here so that you could become a primary school eacher? *Padhaai koi khelwaar baat nahi haye*, education is not something to trifle with. Teaching is for no-hopers, and you know that.' 'But that's what I want to do. I love children.' More troubling than Rani's choice of profession was Ramesh's concern about what others in the community might think of him and his family. Their children were doing law, dentistry, and medicine, socially respectable, point-earning subjects like that. 'Oh God, where

did we go wrong?' he wondered aloud in his lounge chair. 'We haven't gone wrong at all Ram,' Sharmila reacted angrily. 'If primary teaching is Rani's passion, why not let her do it? Who cares what others think? You seem obsessed with this status thing. That's your problem. Please don't take it out on Rani. Beta, ignore your Dad.'

It is not only Rani's choice of career, Shami,' Ramesh said after Rani had left the room. 'She is going off the rails everywhere.' He was especially dismayed that Rani showed no interest in things Indian. 'She seems to be ashamed of her background,' Ramesh said to me. 'She's not ashamed of being an Indian, Bhaiya,' Sharmila retorted, snubbing Ramesh. 'It is just that she doesn't find any meaning in them. It's not only Rani who feels this way. I do too. Their obsession with horoscope and hierarchy leaves me cold. You go to any function, and you will see how these people behave. It is all about who ranks where. The status thing is big with them. They can't figure us out.'

'I am not ashamed of who I am, Uncle,' Rani said to me later. 'But these fellows look down on us, they mimic our language. And just because we go to bars and night clubs and enjoy a drink or two, they think we are easy lays. Sorry about the language, Uncle, but that is the truth.' It was not only India Indians who did that. 'Fiji boys are not much better. Probably worse.'

Rani was like many children I had met over the years. They did not have the language, but they had the right values, I thought: respect for age, polite language in the presence of family and friends, refraining from Western gestures of love and affection in public, never calling older relatives by their first name. All this to me was important. I was proud of the

way our children were negotiating their way around the perilous paths of Australian youth culture.

'Dad keeps putting Australia down, Uncle,' Rani said to me one day. 'What do you expect from a land of convicts,' he says. He seems to have no sympathy for the Aboriginal people. 'Abos' he calls them, '*Hafsis*,' whatever that means.' 'A put-down for 'half-castes.' 'But this is my country now. This is where I have grown up. This is all I know. Yes, it has faults, with all that stuff about the 'Children Overboard Affair' and the 'Stolen Generations,' but it has been kind to us. This is home. I hardly know Fiji and India I have visited only once. Dad can't understand where I am coming from, nor does he want to. That makes it so frustrating.'

'Don't be too harsh on your Dad, Rani,' I said. 'He is a product of his time and place. He has traveled a long way in his lifetime. His journey from Labasa to Liverpool has not been easy. Give the old man a break.' I talked about the difficulties of being a first time migrant. You have to start all over again, usually at the bottom of the ladder. The ambition to become something is gone; you are content just to make ends meet, pass your time until retirement. If you get promoted, it is a bonus. 'It hurts, Beta, all those years of hard work ending like this. A time comes when we want to hold on to things that matter, things that give us purpose and identity. We all have to change with the times, but sometimes you hang on to your past because that is all you have. Have you seen *Fiddler on the Roof*?' She hadn't even heard the name. 'Do, because then you might understand your Dad better.'

'I will, Uncle', Rani replied. 'I don't ask Dad to change his ways. I know he won't. But he should let me live my own life. I am an adult now. I didn't ask to be brought here. This is

Australia, not Labasa. They throw me in at the deep end and expect me to swim straight away. Well, it is not easy. If I don't hang out with my Australian friends, they call me names and keep me out. If I mix around with them, Indians look down on me. Dad thinks getting used to living here is a bed of roses. Well he is dead wrong.'

Rani had dated a few boys, none of them from Fiji or India. She had finally found an Australian boy, David. He seemed, when I met him, to be a decent person, level headed, clean-looking, who was working in the Australian public service. They were in love, holding hands, glancing at each other, making plans for a future together: thinking about putting a down payment on an apartment in Carlingford, taking a loan out for another car, buying gifts for a friend's wedding — the sort of things most young couples do.

Rani and David were completely at ease with each other. Rani's first language was English; she spoke Fiji Hindi haltingly. But her taste in music was totally Western, played by artists whose names I had never heard before. I thought 'Eminem' was a kind of lolly you kept in jars! Flabbergasted at my ignorance, Rani gave me an Eminem poster. 'Put it on your office wall, Uncle: I dare you to.' 'I will,' wondering what my ageing colleagues might think!

David was making a real effort to learn the basics of Indian culture. He was intrigued about the different kinds of uncles we have: Mama (mother's brother), Mausa (aunt's husband), Phuffa (father's sister's husband), Kaka(father's younger brother) and Dada (father's older brother). He would invariably get all this mixed up, causing mirth all around! *Bas Hangama*, enough of this confusion, he would plead playfully. *Ek Jhaapat maarega*, Rani would reply, I will give you one slap, and break

into a giggly smile. David had taken to hot Indian curries, especially *Jungali mugli* (murgi), wild chicken, and was becoming a good cook too, learning to distinguish between different kinds of Indian spices: *jeera, methi, haldi, garam masala*.

Rani's circle of friends included many of her age from various ethnic backgrounds: Greeks, Lebanese, Indians, Sri Lankans, Maltese, Croatians. What brought them together, I realized, was a common predicament. They were all facing pressure from their parents to conform, to stay within defined boundaries, not to let the family down. They were all rebels with a cause, trying to create a niche for themselves in Australia, searching for an identity that reflected their complex cultural heritage. The circle was therapy as well as a counselling session, a network of shared sadnesses, frustrations and clouded hopes.

Sharmila accepted David, but Ramesh exploded when he found out. He felt betrayed. 'Why are you doing this to us? Can't you find someone from our own community?' he asked Rani. 'If you can't, I will. I know a few families with eligible boys. Good boys with education and careers and culture, too. We can go to Fiji, put an advertisement in the papers. Everyone is doing it. I will go along with anyone you choose as long as he is an Indian boy. Is that too much to ask?'

'No, Dad. There will be no advertisement in the papers. I will decide. As a matter of fact, I already have.' Then, all of Ramesh's prejudices came out. 'A *gora* [white man] will always be a *gora*. They are different. Look at their divorce rate. Don't be blinded by this so-called love of yours, Rani. Think about the future. Where will you be in ten years time? You will have no place in our community. Our relatives will shun us. Don't get me wrong. All I want is what is best for you.'

'Let me be the judge of that, Dad,' Rani replied instantly. 'In case you have not noticed, our own divorce rate is nothing to be proud of either. And I will not embarrass you with the names of all your friends, family friends mind you, who freely break their holy marriage vows. See it for yourself who goes in and out of the Sunshine Motel in Parramatta. You will be surprised. It is no point being holier than thou, Dad. At least Australians are honest enough. If things don't work, they don't work out, not like us who pretend everything is hunky dory when often the marriage is just a shell.'

Ramesh thought long and hard about what Rani had said. Her words made sense although he was not quite prepared to admit it. He feared that if he began to see things from another angle, he might lose his own convictions and cultural certainties. If he kept opposing Rani, he realized, he might lose Sharmila as well. Life had not been easy for them. Quarrels had become more frequent, and sullen silences even longer. Sharmila had begun to avoid Indian functions and went out shopping or doing some other errand when Ramesh's friends came home. Her deliberate absence was noticed. Once or twice, the talk of separation had come up in their conversations. Fearing the worst, Ramesh had begun to mellow.

Even so, he was not prepared for what lay ahead. One day, Rani mentioned casually to Sharmila, and within Ramesh's hearing, that she was moving with David into an inner-city two bedroom apartment. 'Why?' Ramesh had asked indignantly. 'What's wrong with this place of ours that you want to move out?' Rani refused to budge. Ramesh pleaded, 'Well, at least get married before you move in. Do the proper thing, girl. Get engaged so we can announce it in a proper way

to our relatives. You are the eldest in our extended family. You should think of your nieces and nephews. You must set a good example for them.' Rani had become immune to such a guilt trip. She was not going to be a moral exemplar for anyone. She had her own life to lead, on her own terms.

Marriage kept recurring in family discussions, causing acrimony and heartache. 'What difference does a piece of paper make, Dad?' Rani said one day. 'What matters is how we feel about each other. We have to find out if we are compatible. I am sure we will get married one day, but at a moment of our choice, not anyone else's. David agrees with me. You should think about what David wants too sometimes' 'But if a piece of paper doesn't make any difference, then why not get it done and over with? All the getting to know each other will come later, as it does in marriages. Adjustment will follow.' 'Dad, please, *Bas*, enough.'

It was at this point that Rani had rung me to help break the impasse between her and her parents, especially Ramesh. 'All I can do is try, Beta,' I told Rani at our lunch at the Black Pepper. 'That is all I ask, Uncle. There should be no doubt in their minds about what I will do. I will not change my mind.' Two very stubborn people, I thought.

The next day, I sat Ramesh and Sharmila down and told them what Rani had told me, her plans for her future with David, her determination to go ahead no matter what. The usual arguments were rehearsed, with increasing temperature between the two of them. 'Rani is a beautiful child,' I said. 'You should be proud of the way you have brought her up. I love her as my own daughter. She is an adult now. You should trust her judgment. David would be a son-in-law you would be proud to have, I would be proud to have. I have met him. I like him.'

'I have bowed so much, Bro, I might just break the next time. First it was the drinking and the nightclubs and the endless late nights. Then, it was long breaks at the coast with boys whom I didn't know, had never met. Then it was all the 'dates,' and now this.' 'Why is it always about you, Ram?' Sharmila reacted angrily, 'How you feel, how hurt you are. Have you ever spared a thought for Rani? What she might want? You treat her like a little kid and she resents it bitterly. As for the *palwaar shalwaar*, extended family, where were they when we needed them, when we first moved to Sydney? No one wanted to know us, if you care to remember. Now, all of a sudden, they have become so important to you. You really are something else, Ram.'

'Ram, the choice seems clear to me,' I said emphatically. 'You can either stick to your views and lose your daughter, or you can bend a little and keep the relationship intact. David is a lovely boy, but if things don't work out, it's not the end of the world. As a father, you should stand in the background, ready to help when your children need help. You encourage and advise and support. You can't dictate. That's a sure recipe for disaster. When it comes down to it Ramesh, it's Rani's life we are talking about, not yours.' I was blunt. Surprisingly, Ramesh took my words calmly. Sharmila seemed quietly satisfied with my firmness.

I was harsher with Ramesh than I should have been or wanted to be. Much later, I found out how convulsed his inner culturally-ordered world was, although he never spoke about it to anyone, including Sharmila. The pettiness and bickering of his fellow community leaders was beginning to drain his spirit, people advancing their own private agendas at every opportunity, abusing the public funds collected for charitable

purposes. *Chor-Chamar*, he called them, scoundrels. Many arranged marriages were floundering, infidelity was common. His own marriage, he realized, was in cold storage and could crack any time if he wasn't careful.

But it took a tragedy in his cousin's family to drive home the dangers of his stubbornness. The cousin insisted that his daughter marry a Fiji boy he had chosen for her, the son of his business partner seeking to migrate to Australia. 'I will hang myself if you don't do it,' he had threatened. The poor girl was in love with someone else, but would not dare to have her father's blood on her hands. Once safely in Australia and his permanent residence papers secure, the boy absconded and married his long-time girlfriend from Fiji. Some months later, rejected, depressed and with no one to turn to, the girl committed suicide with an overdose of sleeping pills. That jolted Ramesh. Robert Browning's words would have summed up his feelings: *This world has been harsh and strange; Something is wrong; there needeth a change*. But how? Ramesh was searching for a solution.

One day, still not making any headway, I had an inspired thought. 'Why don't the four of you go on a holiday together, away from all this *jhanjhat*, bickering? Give yourselves some breathing space. You will have time to consider things calmly, get to know David, see how things go. You can only go up from here.' Sharmila jumped at the idea, Ramesh was less enthusiastic. But in the end, they did go for a holiday in Fiji over Christmas.

'That was the best thing you ever did for us, Bhaiya,' Sharmila told me after they had returned to Australia. The trip was obviously a success. At Nadarivatu, the family had hiked in the forested hills and climbed Mt Victoria, mingled

with the villagers from nearby *koros*, cooked food on an open fire, played touch footy and drank and talked long into the night. This was the first time Ramesh had 'met' David. They talked endlessly — like two chatterboxes, as Sharmila put it — about cricket. Both were passionate and knowledgeable about the game, together composing lists of the all-time great first eleven.

David shared Ramesh's interest in current affairs, more than any of his friends or even family. They both liked the bush and the outdoor life. Nikhil told Ramesh and Sharmila proudly that David was like the older brother he never had. That meant a lot to Ramesh. Rani could be impetuous and flighty, but Nikhil was the thoughtful, sober one in the family. The ice was gradually thawing though everyone gingerly avoided the topic of engagement and marriage. 'I told Ramesh to let me handle that,' Sharmila told me. Good advice, I thought to myself.

In between swimming and kayaking, there were endless hours of talk and tears between Sharmila and Rani. 'Meet your father half way, Beta. Get engaged now. Marriage can come later, at your convenience. We will have enough time for a formal announcement, invitations would be sent out, proper arrangements made. This way you will win Dad over. He will save face. You know how important that is to him.' And then she added, 'And to me, too, if I am honest with myself. I want to give you away in the proper style, in the presence of our family. It's every mother's dream. All that *Monsoon Wedding* stuff.'

'But Mum, we are not ready financially. Think of all the expenses involved, hiring a wedding hall, the reception, the gifts, accommodation for family members. We really can't afford it right now. David wants to complete his university course,

secure his job in the public service. I would like to complete uni. And we both want to travel a bit before we finally settle down.' 'Beta, hosting the engagement party is not your responsibility. It is ours. Dad and I will take care of everything. We have talked about it. That's what parents are for.'

Rani and David went for a long walk on the beach, mulling over Sharmila's proposal. Then, all of a sudden, it happened. Ramesh was swimming when David called out to him. Returning to the beach, Ramesh sat in the hammock under a coconut tree when David said to him, 'Ramesh, will you accept me as your son-in-law?' Rani froze as David spoke the words. Sharmila looked straight into Ramesh's eyes, unblinking. 'Who am I to stand in your way when Rani approves?' Tears were running down Rani's cheek as David hugged Ramesh. 'Rani is the queen of my heart. Cherish her.' Sharmila wiped a tear. 'Oh, I see, so Mother's permission is not required, is it,' she bantered, obviously delighted with the way things had worked out. Then, it was time for beers all around. 'Champagne will come later,' David said, relieved.

The wedding took place a year later at the Sydney Botanical Gardens. It was a grand affair, with nearly one hundred close friends and family in attendance. Rani looked exquisite in a cream sari with colored borders and David was resplendent in his *salwar kamiz*. It was fusion wedding, an eclectic mixture of Hindu and Western ceremonies. Rani and David exchanged wedding vows and rings in a delightfully, if minimally, decorated *mandap* under an ancient eucalyptus tree. I gave a short, light-hearted speech, 'Wedlock is a padlock,' I told David, to laughter. 'Marriage is like a lottery,' I continued to appreciative smiles, 'but you can't tear up the

ticket if you lose!' And then a couple of lines from my favorite poet, Lord Tennyson:

> *Two lives bound fast in one with golden ease*
> *Two graves grass-green beside a grey church tower*

Ramesh and Sharmila were the happiest I had seen them in years.

Immediately after the formal ceremonies were over, Rani and David came over and said, 'Thank you, Uncle, from the bottom of our hearts.' Then, spontaneously in a traditional gesture of respect and affection and seeking my blessing, they both touched my feet in the quintessential Hindu way. Someone had been tutoring David. Perhaps he too was a cultural tutor.

10

One Life, Three Worlds

To be an Indian from Fiji is to be a complex bundle of contradictions. It is to be formed and re-formed by a unique mix of social, cultural and historical experiences. Although the Fijian constitution defines us as 'Indian,' we are, in fact, marked by a confluence of three quite distinct cultural influences: South Asian, Western and Oceanic. Generalizations in these matters are always risky, but the truth will be obvious to people of my age, the post-world war two generation growing up in Fiji. Our food and our religious and spiritual traditions, our dietary habits and general aesthetic sense (in music and cinema, for instance) is unmistakably South Asian. Our language of work and business and general public discourse, our educational system and legal and judicial traditions, our sense of individual and human rights is derived from our Western heritage. And our sense of people and place, our sense of humour, our less charged, 'she'll be alright,' 'tomorrow is another day,' attitude to life in general, comes from our Oceanic background.

A century of enforced living in a confined island space has produced overlapping and inseparable connections. The

precise contribution of one influence over another on us, our world view, on the general shapes of our thought and action, would vary from time to time and from place to place. It would depend on our educational background, the degree of exposure we have had to external influences, the family circumstance and our network of relationships. There will be variation and diversity. We will accentuate or suppress a particular aspect of our heritage depending on the company, context and perhaps acceptance: more English here, less Indian there. Nonetheless, every Indian person from Fiji will carry within them the traces of the three primary influences which have shaped them.

Most Indo-Fijian people of my age would have three — sometimes more — languages: Fiji-Hindi, Hindi, English, and Fijian. Proficiency in the last three would vary. A person growing up near a Fijian village, or with extensive interaction with Fijians at work or play, would speak Fijian more fluently than one who grew up in a remote, culturally self-enclosed Indo-Fijian settlement. Likewise, a person from a rural area is likely to be more fluent in standard Hindi than his or her urban cousin who did not have the opportunity to learn the language formally in primary school. And someone who grew up in a town or city and went to a government or Christian school is likely to be more at home in English than a person from the country.

But every Indo-Fijian person, without exception, would be able to speak Fiji-Hindi without prior preparation. That is the language that comes to us naturally. It is the mother tongue of the Indo-Fijian community, the language of spontaneous communication among ourselves. It is the language that connects us to time and place, to our childhood. It was the language through which we first learned about our

past and ourselves. It was the language that took us into the deepest secrets, stories and experiences of our people. Our most intimate conversation takes place in Fiji-Hindi. Our thigh-slapping sense of humour, earthy and rough and entirely bereft of subtlety or irony, finds its most resonant voice in that language. And its influence persists.

Whenever we Indo-Fijians meet, even or perhaps especially in Australia, we are very likely to begin our conversation by asking *Tab Kaise*, 'How Are You.' This is less an enquiry than an effort to establish an emotional connection. Yet, the irony is that we do not accord Fiji-Hindi the respect that it deserves. Purists tell us that it is broken Hindi, a kind of plantation pidgin, with no recognisable grammatical pattern, full of words with rough edges and a vocabulary of limited range incapable of accommodating complex thoughts and literary expression. We are slightly embarrassed about its humble origins and apologetic to outsiders, especially from the subcontinent. Its use is properly confined to the domestic sphere. It is not the language we use in public discourse. There is little Fiji-Hindi on Fiji radios, there is nothing in the newspapers. The media uses — has always used — standard Hindi. That is what hurts: the continued calculated neglect and the sniggering put-down of the language by the Indo-Fijian cultural elite. The startling gap between the reality of our private experience and the pretensions of our public performance could not be greater.

I cannot comment on the deeper structures and origins of the language, but common knowledge and popular understanding suggest that Fiji-Hindi is 'cobbled together' — as the critics would put it dismissively — from the dialects and languages of northeast India, principally Avadhi and Bhojpuri.

Formal Hindi was not the mother tongue of the immigrant population; these two languages were, which then merged into Fiji-Hindi, with subsequent words, metaphors, images from South Indian languages, and Fijian and English. This was the new *lingua franca* which emerged on the plantations. The plantation system was a great leveller of hierarchy and social status. The caste system gradually disintegrated, and with it the finely-regulated cultural order that the immigrants had known in India. The new regime rewarded initiative and enterprise, and individual labour. The living conditions on the plantations produced new cross-caste, cross-religious marriages. People of all ranks and social and religious backgrounds lived and worked together, celebrated life and mourned its passing communally. They had no other choice.

From that cloistered, culturally chaotic environment emerged a new more egalitarian social order, and a new language, Fiji-Hindi. Old ways had to give way and they did. New vocabulary and grammar had to be mastered, new ways of looking at the world acquired. The Indian calendar — *Pus*, *Saavan*, *Bhadon*, *Asarh*, *Kartik* — was, or began to be, replaced with the Roman calendar. English words entered the new vocabulary, names of institutions (town for *shahar*, school for *pathshala*, *binjin* for benzene, *kirasin* for kerosene, *kantaap* for cane top, bull for the Hindi word *baile*, *phulawa* for plough. And in areas near Fijian villages, Fijian words entered the language as well. This humble new language, levelling, unique, unadorned, a subaltern language of resistance, drawing strands from a large variety of sources, is the language that comes to me naturally.

Yet it is not the language that I would speak on a formal occasion, while giving a public talk in Fiji or an interview to

a Hindi radio station in Australia. I am expected to use formal Hindi in public discourse. Everyone expects this of a cultural or political leader. It confers dignity and status on him, earns him (for it is rarely her) the people's trust and acceptance. To be able to use Hindi fluently is to be seen as someone who has not lost touch with the people, is still connected to his roots, can be trusted not to betray the interests of the community. Over the years, I have given dozens of public addresses in Hindi. People express genuine appreciation that I am still able to speak the language, after being away from Fiji for most of my adult life. 'Look,' they say to the supposedly wayward younger generation losing touch with their cultural roots, 'he lives in Australia but still speaks our language. He hasn't forgotten his roots. And nor should you!' Notice that Indo-Fijian identity in this quote is tied with Hindi. The same people who applaud me for speaking in Hindi would talk to me in Fiji-Hindi in private; to speak in formal Hindi with them in private, informal situations, would be the height of pretension. It is all *tamasha*, theatre.

I am glad I am still able to read and write Hindi. I would be the poorer without it, but for me it is a learned language all the same, with all the limitation learned languages bring with them. Those who hear me speak the language fluently have no idea of the amount of effort I put into preparing my speeches. Although I don't actually read the text in order better to connect with the audience (as all good teachers know), each word is written down, in *Devanagri* script, the speech rehearsed line by line several times over, virtually committed to memory. Proper imagery and metaphors have to be chosen with the help of a bilingual Hindi-English dictionary, because what is clear to me in English is often obscure in Hindi, and the forms

of address are different. The disparity between the private, painful effort of preparation and the appearance of a polished public performance is deep.

For years, I unthinkingly accepted the need to speak formal Hindi. It was the expected thing to do. No other alternative, certainly not Fiji-Hindi, was conceivable. I could speak in English to Indo-Fijian audiences, but that would be pointless, talking over their often unlettered heads. I felt curiously elated that I could read and write and speak the language better than many of my contemporaries; it was my badge of honour and pride, my way of demonstrating that I could still connect with my people. But I now realise the futility of my action: a reluctance to acknowledge the 'game' I was playing, thinking that Hindi was my mother tongue. When it clearly was not.

Hindi was the medium of instruction in most Indo-Fijian community schools from the very beginning, and an examinable subject for the Senior Cambridge School Certificate in the post-war years. From the start, the colonial government was keen on Hindi. It encouraged the spread of English because it was the 'official and business language of the colony,' but Hindi — or Hindustani — could not be ignored. 'Hindus and Muslims alike will need it in different forms as the key to knowledge of their religions and literature and as the means of communication with their relatives and co-religionists in India. And for a considerable section too busy with their own affairs to undergo much schooling, and imperfectly equipped to use a foreign language as a vehicle of thought without danger to their practical relations with their environment, their 'mother tongue' must remain both their sole means of communicating with others and the sole means

of expressing their thoughts and feelings.' Hindustani was important for administrative purposes, too, because 'an adequate knowledge of Hindustani must be needed by the European community in touch with the Indians, the more so because without it, it is, and will be, impossible for the European official or man of affairs to get into close touch with just those classes which to a large extent depend on him for help and guidance.' And finally, there was the broader consideration 'that Hindustani is the *lingua franca* of probably a larger number of inhabitants of the Empire than English itself and is spoken in a number of colonies besides Fiji.'

The government's agenda is understandable, but it is not entirely certain that Hindustani *was* the 'mother tongue' of the indentured migrants, who came principally from the Avadhi-Bhojpuri speaking areas of northeastern India and Telugu, Tamil and Malyali speaking regions of the south. For the South Indians, Hindustani was not the mother tongue at all, and in the north, Hindustani or Urdu was the language of business and administration and the cultural elite, a legacy of the Moghul era of Indian history; it was not the language of the mass of the peasantry. And it is not at all certain that Hindustani was the language spoken in other colonies whose immigrants, too, had derived from the same regions as the immigrants in Fiji. For administrative convenience, then, Hindustani was imposed as the 'mother tongue' of the Indo-Fijian community.

The government's position was supported by the Hindi-favouring Indo-Fijian cultural elite, although many of them preferred not Hindustani — which was a mixture of Hindi and Urdu — but a purer form of formal Hindi, and wished for an extension of English in primary schools. The preference for

Hindi or Hindustani (but not Fiji-Hindi), reflected a wider process of sanskritisation taking place in the community in the post-indenture period. For many Indo-Fijians, indenture or *girmit* (from the agreement under which the immigrants had come to Fiji) was viewed as a period of unspeakable shame and degradation. That ended upon the abolition of indenture in 1920. Community leaders sought to establish voluntary social and cultural organisations to erase the memory of a dark period in their lives, and to impart correct moral and spiritual values to their people.

This was evident in virtually every aspect of Indo-Fijian life. The Fiji-born discarded rural Indian peasant dress of *dhoti* (loin cloth) and *kurta* (long flowing shirt) and *pagri* (turban) for western-style shirt and shorts and slacks. In religion, animal sacrifice and other practices of animism of rural India gradually gave way to cleaner forms of Brahminical Hinduism. The caste system, with all the ritual practices associated with it, slowly disintegrated. Hindu children were given names after gods and goddesses — Ram Autar, Shiv Kumari, Saha Deo, Ram Piyari, Latchman — to erase caste distinction. All these represented a conscious, deliberate dissociation from a past understood as painful, embarrassing and degrading. The public embracing of Hindustani as the *lingua franca* was a part of that effort.

Both Hindustani and Indian history and culture were promoted in the colonial curriculum, and published in the *School Journal* edited by A W MacMillan. Stories of great men and women, of kings and queens, historical events of great antiquity appeared, all designed to make the Indo-Fijian children proud of their ancestral heritage, of their 'motherland': stories about Siddharata (Buddha), Rabindranath Tagore, Emperor Akbar, Pandita Ramabai, Raja Harishchandra,

people like that. The *Journal* also highlighted the great achievements of the British Empire, and published pieces on important places and peoples in it. There was nothing — or very little — on Fiji and the Pacific, little beyond some amusing anecdotes on the Fijian people. So not only the language, but the mind and soul of the Indo-Fijians was nourished by stories from our two 'motherlands': India and England. The actual 'motherland,' Fiji, was left undiscussed, disregarded, confined to the fringes of the humorous anecdotes. Our immediate past was ignored not only because it seemed mundane but also because it was the site of deep contestation. Indenture was an indictment of the government, whom the labourers saw as having a complicit role in the atrocities which they endured on the plantations. India was safer. The emphasis on India and things Indian, hero-worshipping and frankly romantic, continued in the post-war years in the specially composed school texts, *Hindi pothis*, by the India-born Ami Chandra.

English was the second language taught in the Indo-Fijian primary schools. The aim was to give school children an elementary knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, the sort of rudimentary knowledge required to understand official instructions and notices, and occasional snippets from the great texts of English literature. The texts used in the post-war years were the *New Method Readers*, *Caribbean Readers*, *The Oxford English Readers for Africa* and University of London's *Reading for Meaning*. There was nothing in these texts about Fiji or the Pacific Islands. Here is the Table of Contents of *The Oxford English Readers for Africa, Book Six* for the last year of primary education: The Story that Letters Tell, How Messages are Sent, *The Island*, by Cecil Fox Smith, Farmer's Work, The Arctic

Wastes, *I Vow to Thee, My country*, by Cecil Spring-Rice, Sound and Light, Different Kinds of Buildings, The Bees by William Shakespeare, The Fight Against Disease, The Work of the Post Office, *The Discovery*, by JC Squire, The Men Who Made the World Larger, A Wonderful Little Builder, *Bete Humaine* by Francis Brett Young, Napoleon, Some Stories of Famous Men, Bridges and bridge-Building, Good Citizenship, A Famous Speech from Shakespeare, *On Mercy* by William Shakespeare and, finally, Some Business Letters.

The list needs no commentary: it is Anglo-centric and its intellectual orientation and purpose self-evident. Much the same trend continued in secondary schools where English texts and examples were replaced with examples from Australia and New Zealand. I suppose the intention of the texts was to inculcate in us a deep pride in the British empire (upon which the sun never set, we were taught to remember, and to remember, too, that Britannia ruled the waves, that 'we' had won the great wars of the 20th century, that London was the cultural centre of the world, that the best literature, the best of everything — the Bedford trucks, the Austin and Cambridge and Morris Minor cars — came from England), to appreciate the good fortune of being its member, to be grateful for what little tender mercies came our way because we had nothing, we were nothing.

I recognise the cultural bias of the texts now, and it is easy enough to be critical of their colonising purpose. But these large and troubling issues did not matter to us or to anyone else then. I recall the thrill, on a remote sugar cane farm with no electricity, no running water, no paved roads, of reading about faraway places and peoples as an enthralling experience, making imaginary connections with African

children whose neat faces we saw in glossy imperial magazines that came to our school as gifts from the British Council. An acquaintance with them reduced our sense of isolation, expanded our imaginative horizon. And it is the appreciation of that enlarging, enriching, experience that has remained with me.

While we learned a great deal about the western and the Indian world, there was nothing in books about Fijian language and culture, beyond the fear-inducing stories about a cannibal (Udre Udre) who had eaten a hundred men and marked each conquest with a stone — which was there for everyone to see. There were a few innocuous stories about Ratu Seru Cakobau, the wise and great Fijian chief, who eventually ceded Fiji to Great Britain in 1874 and the Tongan intruder and challenger to his authority, Enele Ma'afu; but that was about all. Fijians remained for us objects of fear; many an unruly child was sent to bed with the threat that Seru (or Emosi or Sakiusa or some other Fijian with similar name) would snatch us away from our parents if we did not behave properly.

The Fijian ethos, as we understood it, often through the prism of prejudice, inspired no great respect. We valued individual initiative and enterprise, their culture, we were told, quelled it. We saved for tomorrow, they lived for now. We were the products of status-shattering egalitarian inheritance; Fijian society was governed by strict protocol. They ate beef; we revered the cow as mother incarnate. Our schools were separate. Fijians went to exclusively Fijian schools (provincial primary ones and then to the Queen Victoria or Ratu Kadavulevu), while we attended primarily Indo-Fijian schools. For all practical purposes, we inhabited two distinct worlds, the world of the *Kai Idia* and the world of

the *Kai Viti*. Fiji has paid a very large price for its myopic educational policy.

This, then, is my inheritance, and the inheritance of my generation: complex, chaotic, contradictory. I have lived with it all my life and throughout the course of my university education in different countries over the past three decades. It enriches me even as it incapacitates me, complicates the way I do and see things, the way I relate to people around me, the way I see myself. There have been many moments of sheer agonising desperation over the years when confusion reigned in my linguistically fractured mind, when I could not find words in any language to convey precisely what I wanted to say, how I felt about a particular place or person, when I felt hobbled and helpless, like the washerman's donkey, belonging neither here nor there: *Na ghar ke na ghat ke*.

English is the language of my work. I am not closely familiar with its deeper grammatical structures and rules of engagement and composition: alpha, beta and coordinate clauses, auxiliary, infinitives and intransitive verbs, prepositions and subordinate conjunctions — these things confuse me even now. And its classical allusions to Greek and Roman mythology — Pandora's Box, Achilles Heel, Trojan Horse, Crossing the Rubicon, Cleopatra's nose, Ulysses, Cyclades and Cyclopes Medusa's Head; its references to the stories and people of the Old and New Testaments, to Job, John, Matthew and Abraham, the Wisdom of Solomon, to quotations from the *Book of Ecclesiastes* and *Ezekiel*; its borrowing of words and phrases from European literature — it was years after high school that I realised that the phrase 'to cultivate your garden' came from Voltaire's *Candide*, what TS Eliot meant by 'Hollow Men' and why 'April is the cruellest month,' what Heathcliff's

windswept moors looked like — all this knowledge had to be acquired through surreptitious reading; they remain beyond my easy reach even now.

Yet, my professional competence in the language is taken for granted. The journals and academic presses to which I send my work for publication make no concession to my chequered linguistic background. That is the way the game is played in academia. It has taken many years of learning and un-learning, many years of doubt and desperation, to acquire some proficiency in the language. I try to write as simply as I can, which leads some colleagues, *au fait* with the lexicon of post-modern scholarly extravaganza, to equate simple writing with simplistic thought! I have sometimes been accused of writing fluently, but only if the readers knew the effort, the revision after revision and the deliberate thought that has gone into the writing. I recognise good writing when I see it; I envy the effortless fluency of writers who produce words as if they owned them. Essays and reviews in *The New Yorker*, for instance, with their wonderfully engaging prose, the breathtaking quality of images and metaphors, invariably provoke admiration in me. I readily accept my limitations, my inability to produce with words meanings and miracles like those for whom English is the mother tongue. That is the way it is, and always will be.

Some colleagues in the Pacific islands, non-native speakers of English, are more adventurous, less accepting of the conventions of the language, who are prepared to flout its rules, play with it in unconventional ways, bend it to meet their needs. They have 'indigenised' the language in interesting ways, encouraged, I suppose, by the liberating tenets of post-colonial and cultural studies. So what appears to

me to be badly mangled English in need of a sharp, ruthless, editorial pen is avant-garde poetry for them. In an appealingly rebellious kind of way, they are unapologetic, defiant in their defence of idiosyncrasy. Clearly scholarly conventions, styles and expectations have changed in the last two decades or so. The diversity tolerated — perhaps even encouraged? — now would have been unthinkable when I was learning the alphabets of the academe. I recognise, as I see the younger generation, that I am trapped by a different past and different expectations. I am sometimes accused of being a part of the 'assimilationist' generation which paid scant regard to local modes of expression, local idioms, but slavishly embraced the ethical and intellectual premises of colonial and colonizing education and the English language. I suppose we are all products of our own particular histories.

Writing formal academic English is one thing, speaking it colloquially quite another. To be reasonably effective, one has to have some knowledge of the locally familiar idioms and metaphors, a grasp of the local lingo, as they say. These are not as easy to acquire for someone who came to Australia half-formed. I have had to educate myself on the side about Australian society and culture and history and its special vocabulary. This has not been easy in an academic life filled with pressure to create a refereed paper trail that government bureaucrats can see and understand (and, most importantly, reward). The task is made all the more difficult because we had nothing about Australia in school beyond the most elementary lessons about Lachlan Macquarie, John MacArthur and the merino sheep, the gold rushes of the 19th century, the convict settlement and the squattocracy, cramming exercises in geography (which was the longest river in Australia, its

highest mountain, its capital city, its tallest building: that sort of thing) and the occasional novel (*Voss* and *To the Islands*) in high school. Not surprisingly, Australia remained for us remote and inaccessible, the *sahib's* country, a place to dream about, a land from where all the good things we so admired came: the Holden car, the refrigerator, the tram engine, the canned fruit, the bottled jam and the refined white sugar, so pure and so good, that we used it as an offering to the gods in our pujas.

Seeing Australia as a student from a distance was one thing; living in it, trying to get a handle on the texture of the daily lived life, was another. Its sheer size and variety: the hot, red featureless plains merging into the shrubbery desert in the distance, the remote, rural, one-street towns on the western fringes of the eastern states, dry, desolate spaces along highways littered with the decaying remains of dead animals and the rusting hulks of long-abandoned vehicles, places that lie beyond the certitude of maps, at the back of beyond, as they say. I had to get used to the idea that golden brown, not deep green, was the natural colour of Australia, that its flora and fauna were unique.

New words and phrases I had never heard before had to be learned and used in their proper context: Dorothy Dixer, Gallah, A peshit, Blind Freddy, R els, B ulldust, Coathanger, Dingbat, Wanker, Drongo, Tall Poppy, Scorcher, Ripper, Ratbag, Ocker, My Oath, Knockers, Bludger, Dinky Di, Fair Dinkum, Perv, Spitting the Dummy, words which locals use effortlessly, but which are strange to newcomers. Nothing can be more embarrassing than using a wrong word at the wrong time, or committing a *faux pas*, in the company of people who assume you are equally knowledgeable about the local lingo as them. At a party in Canberra many years ago, I used the word

'fanny' in what context I do not remember. In the United States, where I had lived for a decade, it means female buttock, but here it meant something quite different (you know what I mean!) Pin drop silence greeted my remark, to use that tired cliche.

Beyond vocabulary, I also felt as a new migrant that I should equip myself with the basic knowledge of this country's history. One cannot be a university academic in Australia and remain ignorant of its history, especially when I live in Canberra and have as neighbours colleagues who have had a large hand in shaping the way we see Australia: Ken Inglis, Bill Gammage, Hank Nelson, John Molony, Ian Hancock, Barry Higman. But it is more than the desire simply to be 'one of the boys,' 'to be in the know.' When new migrants enter a country, they enter not only its physical space but also its history with all the obligations and responsibilities they entail; to be effective and responsible citizens, they need to understand the inextinguishable link between the country's past and its present.

So I had to bone up on Australian history and folklore: Gallipoli, Eureka Stockade, Ned Kelly, the Anzac Tradition, the debate about Terra Nullius, the Great Dismissal, the Bodyline Series and Bradman's Invincibles, about Phar Lap, Mabo, Bob Santamaria and Archbishop Daniel Mannix, Dame Edna Everidge, Simpson and his Donkey, Kokoda Trail, Patrick White, Gough Whitlam, 'Pig Iron' Bob, 'The Australian Legend,' 'The Rush That Never Ended.' I now know the names of most Australian prime ministers in roughly chronological order. I am passionate about cricket. My summer begins the moment the first ball is bowled in a cricket test match, and ends when the cricket season is over (and

when the agapanthus die out). And I read Australian literature and follow Australian politics as a hobby. Gaps remain, of course. There is much catching up to do. I wish, as I write this, that I — and the Indo-Fijian community generally — had made half as much effort to understand the culture, language, traditions, the inner world of the Fijian people, among whom we have lived for well over a century, but about whom we know so little. Sadly, the ignorance is mutual.

The curiosity and the thirst for new knowledge I have about this country, its past and its present, its vast parched landscape, is not matched, with few exceptions, by my colleagues and friends in Australia about *me* and *my* background, my history and heritage, the cultural baggage I bring to this country. I have sought to educate myself about the Judeo-Christian tradition, about the meaning and significance of Lent and Resurrection and the Last Judgement, for instance, or about the Sale of Indulgences, the Reformation, about Yahweh and the Torah. And I know a few Christmas Carols too ('*On the twelfth day of Christmas...*'). But my Australian friends, perhaps understandably, have no idea about my religious and cultural heritage, about the *Ramayana* and the *Bhagvad Gita*, about the festivals we celebrate: *Diwali* and *Holi* and *Ram Naumi*, about our ritual observances to mark life's journey or mourn its passing. It is not that they are incurious: they simply don't know. My inner world remains a mystery to them. I regret very much not being able to share my cultural life more fully, more meaningfully, with people whose friendship I genuinely value.

The process of understanding is a one-way street, I often feel. Perhaps they have no incentive to know about me; it is I who have the greater need to know. I am the one who is the

outsider here, not them. Perhaps things will change when — it is no longer a question of if — multiculturalism takes deeper roots, when the public face of Australia truly shows its diverse character, when more of us become more visible in the public arena rather than remain as cartoon characters propped up for public display on suitably ceremonial occasions. The contrast with the United Kingdom is huge in this respect. There, as I discovered in my two extended trips there in recent years, multiculturalism is a publicly accepted and proudly proclaimed fact, in popular culture, in the universities, in the media. Multiculturalism is just starting its journey here. In Australia, in my experience, the primary line of demarcation is gender, not cultural identity. When we advertise positions, we are asked to make special effort to alert women candidates to potential employment opportunities. Universities require adherence to the principle of gender balance on committees. Few colleagues ask: why are there so few Pacific and Asian academics in my research School of Pacific and Asian Studies. Many would remark on the gender imbalance in it. But I digress.

English is my language of work, but it is inadequate in expressing my inner feelings, in capturing the intricate texture of social relationships which are an integral part of my community. There are simply no English words for certain kinds of relationships and the cultural assumptions and understandings which go with them. The English word Uncle denotes a particular relationship which most native speakers would understand. When finer distinctions are required, the words maternal and paternal are added. But it is still inadequate for me. We have different words for different kinds of uncles. A father's younger brother is *Kaka*. His elder brother is *Dada*. Mother's brother is *Mama*. Father's sister's husband is

Phuffa. They are all uncles in English usage. But in Hindi, each has its own place, its own distinctive set of obligations. We can joke with *Kaka*, be playful with him, but our relationship with *Dada* is more formal and distant. A *Dada* can be relied upon to talk sense to one's father, with some authority and effect; a *Kaka*, knowing his proper place in the order of things, cannot, at least not normally. Brother-in-law in English is pretty generic, but not in Hindi. Sister's husband is *Jeeja* or *Bahnoi*, but wife's brother is *Sala*. We have a joking relationship with the latter — he is fair game — but not with the former. Your sister's welfare is always paramount in your mind. A troubled relationship with Jeeja could have terrible consequences for her. Older brother's wife is *Bhabhi*, and younger brother's spouse *Chotki*. *Bhabhi* is treated with a mixture of respect and affection, more like a mother. With *Chotki* we have an avoidance relationship, and keep all conversation to the bare minimum. We don't call *Bhabhi* and *Chotki* by their names. Ever. And it would be unthinkable for them to call you by your name either. We relate to each other not as individuals, but as social actors with culturally prescribed roles.

Some of the cultural protocols and restrictions governing family relationships have inevitably broken down in Australia, and even in urban Fiji, succumbing to forces of modernity and the culturally corrosive effects of accelerated mobility. You have no choice but to speak to *Chotki* if she is the one who picks up the phone. But my younger sisters-in-law still do not address me by my name, not because this is something I myself prefer. On the contrary. I am still addressed respectfully as *Bhaiya*, as cultural protocol, or memory of cultural protocol, demands. And I take care not to be a part of loose talk in their presence. All the children invariably call me

Dada. It would be unthinkable for them to call me by my name. It is the same with my children when addressing their uncles and aunties. Even Indo-Fijian community elders and my friends would be called uncles and aunties though this convention or practice would not apply, on the whole, to my Australian friends. So, in denoting the complex maze of domestic relationships we have, I find English inadequate.

English has made greater inroads and makes more sense in other day-to-day activities though. When shopping for groceries, I often use English names. Watermelon, for example, not *Tarbuj*, Bananas, not *Kela*, Rice, not *Chawal*, Onion, not *Piyaz*, Potatoes, not *Aloo*. But some vegetables I can only properly identify with the names I used as a child: I always use *Dhania*, not Coriander, *Haldi*, not Turmeric, *Karela*, not Bitter Gourd, *Kaddu*, not Pumpkin, *Dhall*, not Lentils. I wish I knew why some names have remained and others have gone from memory.

I was once a fairly fluent reader and speaker in Hindi, although now the more difficult sanskritised variety is becoming harder to understand. It takes longer to read the script and decipher its meaning. Listening to the news, on SBS Hindi radio for instance, I get the meaning but miss the nuances; painfully, the gap increases with each passing year. My Hindi, now more stilted than ever, is restricted to the occasional conversation with people from South Asian background, from India, Pakistan and even Bangladesh. There is an expectation on the part of many South Asians that I would — should — know Hindi because I look Indian and have a very North Indian name.

It is not an unreasonable assumption. And I use it, as best I can, to establish rapport with them, to acknowledge our

common ancestral and cultural heritage, to establish a point of contact, to define our difference from mainstream Anglo-Australia. I cannot deny the enjoyment this gives me. Many weekend taxi drivers in Canberra are Pakistani university students keen to bolster their meagre incomes. When I travel with them, they — or I — would ask the obligatory question: Where you from? The taxi drivers would reply in English. *Achha*, okay, or *Theek hai*, that's fine, I am likely to say. If there is chemistry (about cricket, for example) we will continue in English-interspersed Hindustani. When words fail, or are unable to carry a conversation forward, we revert to English, but the connection has been made. That is the important point; that is what matters.

Hindi comes in handy in my private cultural life. The music that fills my house, to the bemused tolerance of my children — Dad is playing *his* music again! — is Hindustani or, more appropriately, Urdu: *ghazals*, romantic songs, by Mehndi Hassan, Jagjit Singh, Pankaj Udhas, Talat Aziz, Ghulam Ali, and sweet-syrupy songs from Hindi films of yesteryears by Talat Mehmood, Mohammed Rafi, Lata Mangeshkar and Mukesh. This is the music that arouses the deepest emotion in me, takes me to another world, can reduce me to tears. An even faltering knowledge of the language, often with the assistance of a bi-lingual dictionary, enriches my appreciation of the words in the songs.

It is the same with movies, though the language of the screen, designed to reach the masses and denuded of flowery literary allusions, is much more accessible. Most Hindi videos these days are dubbed in English to reach the non-Hindi speaking world (especially the Middle East and Southeast Asia) or young children of the diaspora who have no Hindi,

but the pleasure is not the same as listening to and understanding the dialogue in the original language. Hindi enables me to enter a wider culture and connects me to people and places that would otherwise remain inaccessible. In that sense it is like English, minus the fluency.

I am glad I still retain some small knowledge of the language. But things of the heart, which give me meaning and deep pleasure, enrich my life, I cannot share with most of my Australian friends. The gulf is too wide; we are too different. Nor, to be fair, can I, try as I might, understand or truly enjoy the deepest aspects of their cultural and aesthetic life. I was on a remote pre-historic farm, beyond the reach of radio, when the Beatles were taking on the world! And the sporting heroes of Australia, with whom they grew up, are unknown to me.

In everyday life, though, I do not use formal Hindi at all. To do so would be considered silly and pretentious. At home with my wife, and sometimes with my children, I speak Fiji-Hindi. It is my natural language. There are no standard conventions which I have to follow. Its loose grammatical structure enables me to improvise, to incorporate into the vocabulary English words of ordinary usage. That freedom is exhilarating. I use Fiji-Hindi when talking to other Indo-Fijians, not necessarily to converse at length in it, but to establish a point of recognition. The nature and depth of the conversation would depend on the closeness I have with the speaker. With most Indo-Fijian men, I would have no hesitation using Fiji-Hindi. I would be more reserved with Indo-Fijian women though, so as not to give any signal or hint of intimacy. Indian cultural protocol even today demands a degree of distance between men and women who are not close friends or family: hugging, giving someone a peck on the

cheek and other western forms of showing affection are out of bounds and considered improper. English would for me be the most comfortable medium of communication with them, neutral. It is the same with my wife when talking to Indo-Fijian men. With children of friends and family, I normally speak in English, conscious that they might not — and many don't — have Hindi or Fiji-Hindi.

The Fiji-Hindi I speak now is not the one I spoke as a child. Then, it had few foreign words. But now, my Fiji-Hindi is increasingly filled with English words and phrases. I suspect it is the same in many urban parts of Fiji too. *Drinks aur Dinner hai*: it is a drinks and dinner party. *Kafi late hoi gaye hai*: it is getting quite late. *Lunch kar liha*: have you had lunch. *Kutch trouble nahi*: no trouble. *Bada bad hoi gaye*, does not look good, *Us ke support karo*, support him, *Report likho*, write a report, *Walk pe chale ga*, will you join me for a walk, *Telephone maro*, ring. My Fiji-Hindi would sound strange, unfamiliar, to people of my father's generation back in rural Fiji. My children's precariously limited, English-accented Fiji-Hindi would be incomprehensible to them, just as their language, full of rustic references and vanished metaphors and words would appear vaguely strange to us.

There is some sadness in this perhaps inevitable change. It is the price we pay for 'progress,' I suppose, for living away from our place of birth. Fiji-Hindi was the language of my childhood. It was the only language of communication between me and my parents, both of whom were unlettered and are now dead. It was the language through which I saw the world once, through which I learned about our past and ourselves, told stories and shared experiences. That Indo-Fijian world, and my mother tongue, will go with me.

Fiji-Hindi is my mother tongue, not my children's, who have grown up in Australia. They have some faltering familiarity with it, but that will go with time. It is the same with other children — or young adults — of their age. There will be little opportunity or incentive for them to continue with the language. Fiji is their parents' country, they say, not theirs. For most of them, English will effectively become the only language they have. Some Indo-Fijian families in Australia and elsewhere, traumatised by the coups and the ravages of ethnic politics, have actively sought to erase their memories of Fiji and things Fijian, even Indo-Fijian. The rejection of Fiji-Hindi is a part of that process of denying the past. Others have sought actively to embrace aspects of Indian subcontinental culture. Their children learn Hindi or Urdu in community-sponsored language classes. They attend temples and mosques to learn the basics of their faith and celebrate all the most important festivals of the Hindu or Muslim calender. Classical dance and music classes flourish in many Indo-Fijian communities in Australia.

Hindi or Urdu, I suspect, rather than Fiji-Hindi will be the second language of choice for the new generation. Born or brought up in Australia, they will have their own contradictions and confusions to deal with. Their problems and preoccupations will be different from mine. I admire the way they are adapting to their new homeland in ways that I know I could not, did not have the skills to. Confident and resourceful and inventive, they are completely at home in cross-cultural situations. The cultural gulf between their world and that of their Australian friends in music, film and general aspects of popular culture will never be as great as it is for me and people of my

generation. My fears and phobias, my confused and confusing cultural inheritance, won't be theirs. Mercifully, their destinies won't be hobbled by mine.

As for me? The words of Mary Oliver will do:

When it is over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular and real.

I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited the world.

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Brij V Lal
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